RHYTHM OF Love

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NIVEDITA VEDURLA

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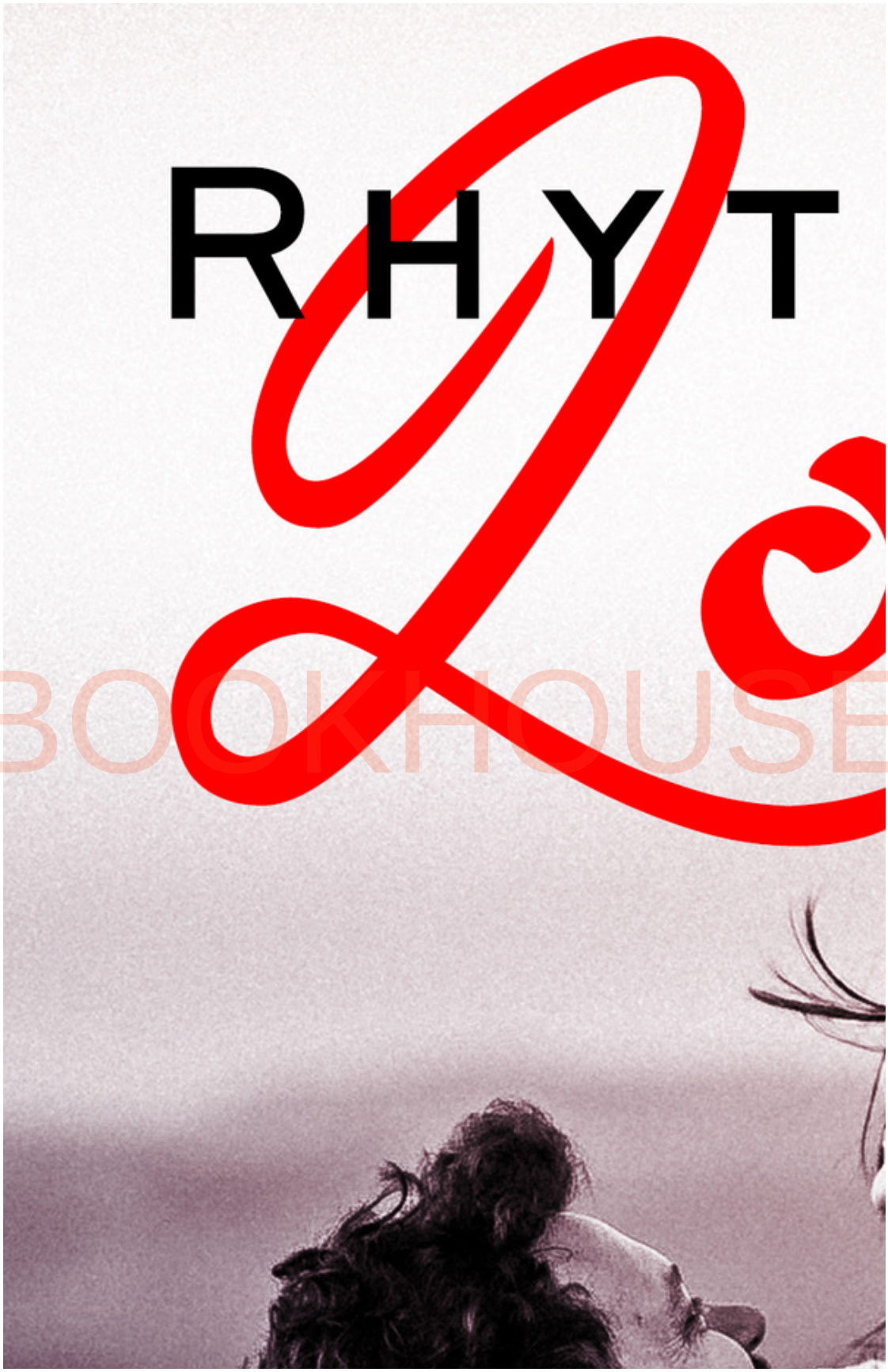

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Rhythm of Love

BY

Nivedita Vedurla

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To the person holding the book, I wish love happens to you at the right time and with the right one. Incase life doesn't turn up as you wished, give yourself a cuddle and remember God is always with you.

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Chapter 1

The open window flapped like the wings of a bird as the wind tried to blow into the house. Esha clamped the window stopper and peered through the window. The sun had set but there was no sign of her mother. Giving up hope that her mother would be coming anytime soon, Esha slouched on the sofa.

She looked at the wall clock once more. It showed both hands extended vertically. It was six o'clock. She let out a sigh and started thinking about an excuse for not going to the pub.

She mumbled to herself, "I'll tell her I'm not well, but she'll never believe me. She'll accuse me of breaking my promise to her."

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She clasped her hands and prayed, "God! Please let mom get home early and also make her agree to let me go to the pub."

A minute later, she got up and looked out of the window again. There was no sign of her mother.

"Why did I agree to that bet? That too with Lucky? She always makes me do things which I'm not able to do."

Esha looked at her phone. She punched in Lucky's number, but then she remembered the bet.

They were just about to do their child psychology class test. The answers were all multiple-choice. Esha was discussing the answers with Lucky while holding the question paper in her

hand. She was marking off every right answer that Lucky had given. The total came to 15.

Esha gave Lucky her total number of marks. But, Lucky shook her head and said, “No, I will get 12..right.”

“No, you will get 15. No more, no less,” she said.

Lucky then said, “So if you are so confident, let’s place a bet.”

Esha looked scared. The odds of her betting against Lucky were always a failure. She shook her head and said, “No!”

Lucky replied mockingly, “That means you are wrong.”

Esha immediately grabbed Lucky’s hand and said, “Ok, let’s bet.”

Seconds later, Esha began biting her bottom lip and realized that she had made a hasty decision.

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Lucky smiled gently, her eyes brightened and she tried to hide her feelings. Then she said, “So, if I get a mark of less or more than 15, you will do what I say.”

Esha protested and said with a frown, “But you said you wouldn’t get more than 12 correct answers.”

Lucky smiled and said, “Yes, but you are so sure I will get 15. Let’s bet on that.”

Esha thought about what Lucky was saying and tried to work out what plans were running around in Lucky’s head.

A few days later, their teacher distributed their answer papers with the marks circled with a blue pen. Esha smiled seeing her score was 20/20 and looked towards Lucky, who also had a big smile on her face. She showed Esha her answer sheet. It showed a mark of 16/20.

Esha quickly responded, “Nice!”

“Yes. My marks are more than you said they would be. So you lose the bet,” said Lucky.

Esha protested, “But this can’t be right. I accepted the bet on what you said you would get and you should be getting 15.”

She looked closely at Lucky who was looking very happy that her trick had worked out so well.

Esha said, “You tricked me with an extra answer. You knew you would win the bet.”

Lucky laughed at the accusation. “You lost. Now you must come with me to The Rockstar Pub in Mumbai.”

Esha shook her head and said, “No way! You know how my mom is. She never lets me go to such places. And besides, when did you start going to pubs?”

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Lucky smiled, “I’ve never been there. That’s why I’m taking you along.”

Esha shrugged her shoulders, “No, I can’t go.”

Lucky gave her a stern look and said, “You promised and promises should always be kept.”

Esha sighed and imagined how hyper her mother would be about this matter. But then again she thought about her father’s words, “Never break a promise.”

“Ok, I will try and come with you,” she said.

‘As always, Lucky had tricked her with two words - bet and promise. One shouldn’t be made and the other shouldn’t be broken,’ Esha thought.

While she was still thinking about the mistake she had made in agreeing to the bet, she heard someone approaching her house.

At last! Her mother came in holding a bag of vegetables. Esha quickly jumped up and grabbed the bag from her mother's hand and offered her a glass of water.

Sipping the water, her mother asked, "Why aren't you studying? Exams are just a few days away…"

Esha pressed her lips together, concentrating on what to reply while at the same time thinking, "Mom, won't allow me to go out today."

Her mother asked again, "What are you thinking so much about? Why aren't you studying?"

Esha replied, "We are doing a project assignment. It's for 20 marks and will be added to the final marks. Ritu and I are doing it together. We completed half of it in college and the rest we need to do together and submit by tomorrow. I was waiting for you to come home so that I could go to her place and we can complete it there."

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"Why didn't you finish it earlier?" her mother asked.

"The assignments were only given out last week. It's a big project," Esha replied.

Her mother's eyes narrowed while looking at Esha and she asked, "Are you staying there for the night?"

Esha felt scared as her mother continued to look closely at her. She held on to the wooden table and shook her head saying, "No, mom… I will be back by 11."

Her mother placed the glass of water on the table and looked at Esha.

“Ok, then go,” she said.

Esha’s eyes lit up and in a high-pitched voice she said, “Thanks, mom. I’ll be back on time.”

Her mother smiled and said, “Take your sweater, it’s cold outside.”

Esha nodded her head and thought about which sweater she could take with her to a pub.

Her mother in the meantime was still looking uncertainly at her daughter. Taking a step forward, she looked directly at Esha and said, “Remember Esha, man is more dangerous than any vultures and hyenas and friends are actually more dangerous.”

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Esha had goose bumps on her arms hearing her friends being compared to such dangerous birds and animals. She nodded, and said nervously, “I will remember that mom.”

She quickly stuffed her bag with a t-shirt and a pair of pants that she thought she could change into at Lucky’s house. She left the house as fast as she could before her mother could make out the actual reason for her wanting to go out.

Reaching Lucky’s house, she knocked on the main door. While waiting for it to be opened, she looked around and was amazed at the whitewash paintwork that had recently been done to their house. The garden looked elegant with a mixed variety of flowers radiating their colours into the night.

Lucky’s mother opened the door and asked her to come inside.

“Where are you both going?” asked Lucky’s mother.

Esha felt a lump form in her throat, as she didn’t know what to reply. She tried to remember what Lucky had told her about going to this pub. She couldn’t remember her saying anything about what she would tell her family.

To her relief, a moment later Lucky appeared and said without any hesitation, “Mom, we’re going to a pub. We will be back soon. Don’t worry.”

Her mother narrowed her eyes thinking for a moment, then smiled and said, “Just get here on time. Don’t be late. Enjoy yourselves.”

Esha’s mouth dropped open as she stared at Lucky’s mother.

‘What? No ifs or buts? Just get here on time and enjoy yourself! I’m stunned. I had to hear all about vultures and hyenas!’ she thought to herself.

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Lucky took Esha into her bedroom where she changed. Then they left Lucky’s house.

Esha was trying to compare Lucky’s mother with her own while they sat in a rickshaw. Lucky instructed the rickshaw driver to take them to a pub located in Mumbai. She saw that Lucky didn’t haggle about the price but asked the driver to take a quicker route to the pub.

Esha’s thoughts shifted back to her comparison of their families. She wondered why they were so different? Did money make a difference? Or having a father?

She remembered the day when she had been at school attending her science class and she had been summoned to the principal’s office. When she reached the principal’s office, the

principal said to her class teacher, who was also there, “Arun, can you please drop Esha at her house? She needs to go there urgently.”

Her teacher took her to her house as instructed by the principal. There was a deadly silence all around her house and then she heard her mother wailing as she got to the front gate.

As she entered the house, she saw her father’s body laid out on the floor and covered with a white cloth.

Esha didn’t understand how much life would change from that time on. Without her father around, things started to change quickly. People began to pop into their house and to give advice on how they should carry out their daily tasks.

When she opposed her mother saying, “Mom, this is not what Papa would have suggested or advised,” her mother just gave a sad dry smile and said, “When you don’t have enough money to survive, your feelings are not taken into account or noticed. Now that your father is not around, money is hard to come by, so we have to get help from our relatives and do what they say.”

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After seeing Lucky and her family and their broadminded attitude, Esha realized that her mother was very strict and overprotective because of the lack of money and having no husband and father to support them.

She looked at her watch. It was 8 o’clock when they reached the pub. The place was not exactly in Mumbai, but close to the highway. That was the reason why they had got there so fast.

The loud sounds coming from the building surrounded by a lush garden confirmed that was the place they were going to.

Esha didn't know if Lucky had been there previously, but she knew that by being with Lucky, she didn't need to feel so afraid.

As they stepped into the pub, the guard checked their tickets and allowed them to enter.

Esha felt like she was really in a jungle. Some of the men and women looked quite bizarre and almost animal-like. She stuck close to Lucky while looking all around her.

Esha followed Lucky, who was marching towards the bar counter. She whispered in Lucky's ear, "Are you going to drink?"

Lucky smiled, "Yes."

Esha started to panic. She thought, 'What if Lucky passes out? How will we get home?'

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She watched Lucky closely as she sipped her drink, trying to see if she was alright or if she was going to pass out. But she didn't faint and even ordered a second drink.

The bartender handed Lucky her drink, saying, "Ma'am, your drink. Vodka with lemon."

Esha watched Lucky smiling at the guy and taking a quick sip of her drink.

An expression passed over Lucky's face as if she'd suddenly got the sharp taste of the lemon peel, but after a moment she smiled saying, "Ah, nice."

Handing over the glass to Esha, she said, "Take a sip. You will like it."

Esha looked reluctantly at the glass.

“Come on. It’s going to be fun,” said Lucky and looked at her with impatient eyes.

Esha made a face and said, “No, I can’t. Mom will scold me if she finds out.”

“Only if she finds out about it,” chuckled Lucky and patted Esha saying, “You should at least try it once.”

Esha repeatedly said no but Lucky kept on encouraging her to try it just once.

Feeling like she had no option and with the little naughty girl inside her shouting to try it, Esha lifted the glass to her lips and took a sip. In the next instance, she spat the vodka out of her mouth trying get rid of the taste of the vodka from her tongue.

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“Yuks! How can you drink that stuff?” she asked Lucky.

Lucky laughed and handed Esha a glass of water.

Just then a boy with blonde dyed hair came to stand next to them. He stood so close to Esha that she could smell the alcohol in his breath. As much as Esha disliked the taste, she hated the smell of it too. She stepped back as he introduced himself.

“Hey, I’m Vicky. I saw you spit out the drink. I think you are not used to it, but I know you will like it if you are in good company,” he said with his eyes showing the lewd thoughts running through his mind.

Lucky moved in front of Esha and stared at the boy with disgust. With a sarcastic smile on her face she told him, “Try somewhere else. She’s not interested.”

The boy tried to convince Lucky with a lot of big smiles, but she knew this trick and didn't move an inch. A minute later, the boy took his cue and left them.

Esha felt relieved, but kept looking in the direction he went, just to make sure he didn't return. She noticed a boy a little older than her staring at her and Lucky. He had a knowing smile on his face and looked at her as if she was from another planet. His smile had a tinge of mockery and pity. She felt disgusted and wondered, 'What's wrong with these boys? Why is everyone behaving in such a weird way?'

She turned her head away and looked at the bartender. Through the corner of her eye, she felt his gaze still on her. He was quite some distance away, but she felt his mocking smile burning her emotions. She turned and looked back at him. He was busy talking to someone else, another girl at the bar. They didn't seem like a boyfriend or a girlfriend or even friends. She watched as he gave the girl some change and then patted her arm before she left.

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Her eyes were still hooked on him when he got up from his seat and started walking to the exit. He gave her a little goodbye wave. At first, she didn't like the gesture, but he smiled gently giving her one last smile.

Her lips broke into a smile too, and she wondered if he was perhaps genuine and not mocking her.

Lucky had moved to a couch in the corner and Esha sat next to her. Not having anything to do she tried to concentrate on the music and looked around at the people. Some appeared happy, some sad, while others seemed on the verge of becoming crazy. Her ears began to ache due to the loud music and she

felt uncomfortable with all the unfriendly stares she was getting.

It had been half an hour since they had arrived there and she already felt bored. She slouched down into her seat and said to Lucky, “Let’s go. I’m getting bored here.”

Lucky turned to her and said, “Bored? How can anyone get bored here? Look at how happy everyone is? What’s wrong with you? You must get out once in a while like this or you will become boring to everyone else.”

Esha knew what she was trying to say. It wasn’t the place that was boring, it was just that she had become boring. But still she didn’t feel like staying any longer and said, “We can come back here again, can’t we? Can’t we leave now?”

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Lucky shook her head saying, “We’ve only just got here. We’ve hardly been here an hour.”

Esha looked unhappy. She said, “I promised my mom, I’d be back before 11 o’clock.”

Lucky let out a sigh and said, “Ok, let’s go.”

Esha felt relieved that Lucky understood how anxious she felt about getting home on time and also how uncomfortable it was for her to be at the pub.

Luckily, a rickshaw was available near the pub, but he asked for a double charge and Lucky agreed instantly. When they reached Lucky’s house, Esha rushed into the bedroom, changed into her dress quickly, and hurriedly said good night to Lucky.

Just before reaching her house, she looked at her watch. It was 10:30 p.m. Letting out a sigh of relief that she had got home

before 11, she knocked on the door.

Her mother opened the door and immediately asked, “Is your project done?”

Esha nodded her head, and said, “Yes, we finished it.”

Her mother looked at her and said, “Show me. What it is about?”

Esha’s eyes widened in surprise at her question. She quickly answered her.

“It is an online project. That’s why I had to go her house to work on it.”

Her mother nodded her head and said, “Ok. Wash your hands and let’s eat.”

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As they sat down to eat, Esha kept the conversation to the minimum and ate as fast she could. She told her mother that she needed to get started early the next day and that she should go to bed as soon as they were finished eating. Lying on her bed a while later, she promised herself never to become involved in any more bets.

This had been Esha’s first time at any pub and the first time out of her town too. This had been a bold step and she felt happy, but at the same time stressed about her mother finding out about it.

At times, Esha wondered about always being good and doing only what her mother allowed her to do. She was restricted to the confines of her home and college. The only roads she knew were the ones, which connected her house to her college and previously to her school. The good girl tag that her mother gave her meant so many sacrifices in terms of making

new friends and taking new roads. The only friend she had was Lucky, her short name for Laxmi Khanna. And anything that she knew beyond the school and the college was passed on to her by Lucky.

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It was a Saturday afternoon. There was no college because the college juniors were writing their exams. Esha was at home reading one of her college books when Lucky called her.

She said, “Let’s go out for lunch. I’m so bored staying at home for the whole day.”

“Sorry, but no. I don’t think I can go out with you.”

However, Lucky begged and pleaded with her, saying, “We’ll be back in an hour. I’m super bored and so miserable sitting around the house. Please.”

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Esha finally agreed and went to Lucky’s house. Together they went to a small restaurant nearby.

Ordering their food, they sat down to wait for it. They talked about their plans for the future. Half an hour later when the waiter began serving their food, Esha looked up and saw her mother approaching. She was angry.

Esha stood up as her mother came close to them.

“Is this what you do after I leave for work?” her mother said accusingly.

Esha’s eyes filled with tears. She didn’t know how to answer her mother. To her relief, she heard Lucky answer her mother’s question.

“Aunty! We only came here to have lunch. We’ve been here for a short time.”

Esha’s mother didn’t look satisfied with Lucky’s answer, and she told Esha to go home immediately. Later that day, her mother asked her to cut off her friendship with Lucky and only think about her studies.

Esha couldn’t understand why her mom restricted her like this. ‘What’s wrong with going out with friends?’ She thought to herself. But she was left with no choice but to obey her mother’s orders.

The next day when she went to college, she didn’t sit in her usual place next to Lucky. She sat two rows away from her.

At lunchtime Lucky came and sat down in front of her.

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“Did your mom tell you to stay away from me?” she asked.

Esha nodded her head without looking up. Her eyes began to fill up, but she didn’t want Lucky to see her tears.

Lucky took Esha’s hands and held them gently.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “Don’t cry. This only happened because of me. Just remember if you need anything, let me know. Our friendship doesn’t end with this. I will always be there for you.”

She looked up at her friend with teary eyes and said with a smile, “Thank you.”

It was quite painful for her to avoid the only friend she had in life, but she could not betray her mother’s trust.

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A month later, the college graduation results came out. Her fellow students were planning to do further studies or looking for positions where they could apply to do internships. Esha's mother suggested that she should start searching for jobs in the local newspapers.

"Mom, I think I need to study more to get a good job and a decent salary," said Esha looking at the jobs posted and the salaries that were being offered.

"Esha, I feel the same way as you do, but life is clearly not on our side. It would be better if you found a job and did part-time studies," her mother said stroking her hand.

Esha found the touch of her mother's hand to be gentle, but they were always cold. It seemed as if all the warmth in her hands had been taken away from working at the ice factory. Esha understood her mother's distress and did as she suggested. She would have to look for a job instead of continuing her studies, but there weren't any well-paid jobs in their town. She mentioned to her mother that there was a good chance of finding a job in Mumbai. Her mother immediately responded that she didn't want her to go and work in Mumbai.

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Esha found a very ordinary job and after a month received her first salary. Her mother thought about the hard work Esha was doing in her job and the small salary she received. Later that evening, when Esha came back after doing her shift, her mother brought her a cup of tea and sat down next to her.

"I called Uncle Mohit today," her mother said.

"Who?" asked Esha. Her mother explained that they had a relative whose name was Mohit.

“Do you know what he said when I told him you needed a place to stay in Mumbai while you look for a job?” she asked. Esha looked at her mother curiously and shook her head.

“How can she stay anywhere else?” he said. “Esha will stay with me. Don’t worry. I will take care of everything. If I had been married, I would have had a daughter of her age. Be rest assured that I will arrange everything that she needs while she is here.”

“But…” said Esha.

“Your father’s relatives say that he is a good man and that he stays close to the main region of the city. So it will be convenient for you,” said her mother.

Esha smiled, happy to see that her mother was finally agreeing for her to work in Mumbai, but she could still see some concern in her mother’s eyes.

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Esha pressed her mother’s hand gently and said, “Don’t worry, Mom. I’ll be ok.”

“But you have never been outside our little town!” she exclaimed. “If only I could get a holiday, I could go with you to Mumbai …”

She rested her head on her mother’s shoulders, giving her a hug and said, “Don’t worry, Mom. I’ll be fine.”

A few days later, Esha had packed a small suitcase and was ready to leave. She felt reluctant to leave her mother and to step outside of her own safe world. They both stood facing each other wanting to say so much to each other, but neither of them could find the right words to comfort each other.

As the rickshaw began to leave, Esha could see the sadness in her mother's eyes. She heard her say, "Be careful. Take care of yourself."

She turned and shouted back, "You too, Mom. Take care."

As soon as the rickshaw was some distance from her home, Esha called Lucky to tell her that she was moving to Mumbai to search for a job. Her happiness knew no bounds when Lucky told her that she had moved to Mumbai a week ago and had already found a job.

An hour later, she reached Panvel and was met by a 50-year-old man who was her Uncle Mohit. He welcomed her and took her to his home.

At first Esha felt a little awkward staying alone with her Uncle but after a few days she began to feel relaxed. She found her Uncle to be a generous man. He seemed to take care of her just as a father would take care of his own daughter. He often would inquire about how her day had been while she was job hunting. He would ask her if she had eaten and at times, he would get her a hot snack and spoil her with ice creams and cold drinks.

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Walking long distances and going from one office to another used to exhaust her a lot. In the evenings, when she returned to her Uncle's house feeling quite tired, he would hand her a cup of warm tea. Talking about the day, they would then cook together, discussing what jobs she had found.

She felt nice and comfortable in his company and even felt blessed to be with him during this time.

One day when she returned, she found her uncle had already prepared the dinner and was watching TV. He asked her to change and set the table.

While having dinner, he asked her, “What are your plans for marriage?”

She laughed and said, “Marriage? No ways. I need to find myself a good job first.”

He shook his head and said, “At your age, it is best to stay at home, marry and start a family.”

She wasn’t convinced that this was what she should be doing right now with her life.

“I have the responsibility of helping my mom and I don’t want to settle down right now,” she said.

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He didn’t say anything more, just nodded his head. After dinner, Esha put on the TV again and started to watch the news channel. Her uncle also joined her.

“This is the problem with you young girls. You take on unnecessary stress by constantly needing to be updated with the latest news and wasting so much of time. You all want to become independent, so quickly. Esha, you should watch some good romantic movies instead of the news channels and enjoy life while you are young,” he said, smiling at her.

Moving closer to her, he took the remote from her hand, brushing her hands gently with his and switched the channel to a movie.

He looked happy and delighted when a musical came on. “Wow, what a song!” he exclaimed excitedly.

He started to sing loudly and she enjoyed seeing him in such a happy mood. Suddenly, he stood up and started to dance. Putting out his hand towards her, he invited her to dance with him. She felt shy being approached like that and said reluctantly, “No thanks, Uncle. I don’t know how to dance.” She started to feel a little weird as he kept pestering her to dance. When she didn’t join him, he grabbed hold of her hands and pulled her up off the couch.

His smile turned wicked as he tried to stroke her hair and slid his hand down her back. Caught in the sudden change of her uncle’s behaviour, Esha’s stomach twisted and she tried to step back. He kept a strong hold on her. He was holding her so close that she could smell the stench of alcohol on his breath.

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Her eyes had begun to fill with tears as she tried to pull away from him. In seconds, the man she thought was a blessing had become a monster.

She pleaded with him, “Uncle… please let go of me. You are hurting me.” But he paid no attention to her pleas.

She started feeling scared and recalled her mother’s words –“Man is more dangerous than any vultures or hyenas.” She realised this to be true. Her Uncle was behaving like an animal.

As her thoughts began comparing the similarities between a hyena and her Uncle, she heard her phone ringing from the other room. Realizing that this could be her only chance to escape, she pushed with all her strength and broke free from her Uncle’s grip.

“Uncle, my phone is ringing. It might be my mom,” she shouted at him.

Mentioning her mother must have scared him because he didn't follow to her room, she closed the door and reached for her phone. It was her friend, Lucky.

As soon as she heard Lucky ask her how she was, she told her everything about staying in her Uncle's house and what had happened just a few minutes ago.

Esha sank down onto the floor with the phone in her hand and said to Lucky, "How do I tell my mom about this? How can I stay here till my mom comes? Lucky, please help me."

"Leave that place at once. Do it when he goes to sleep. Don't bother to pack everything, just take whatever is necessary. Don't wait for your mother to come," Lucky said. "Sometimes in life, you have to be your own saviour. I will message you my address. Take a taxi and I will be waiting for you there."

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It was just good luck for Esha that Lucky had called to say hello.

She packed a few things as Lucky had suggested and escaped when her uncle fell asleep. When she finally reached the rented house where Lucky was living, she broke into sobs and hugged her friend tightly. Lucky comforted her and said she must not worry about anything. She would speak to the owner of the house and ask for permission for Esha to stay with her.

The next day Lucky said to Esha, "You need not worry about paying any rent here. The owner is a relative of mine and doesn't have a problem with you staying here." Esha felt so relieved.

She still had to find a way to tell her mother that she was not staying with Uncle Mohit anymore. She thought about what to

say all day. Eventually, she called her mother and told her that she had taken a room in a ladies' hostel. She said it was closer to where she could get work and that she wouldn't have to travel so far every day. She couldn't tell her mother what had happened at Uncle Mohit's house for fear of how she would react and how upset she would get after knowing the truth. The other reason for her to tell a lie was that she was scared her mother would say it was unsafe for her to remain in Mumbai and that she should return home and then all her dreams would die a sudden death.

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Chapter 2

A couple of days later, Esha felt better and thought about resuming her job search. She took the newspaper and started noting down the contact addresses and other details.

Lucky asked her, "Did you find anything?"

Esha shook her head. "There are no good jobs for beginners or students and all the jobs with good salaries need someone with experience. The packages offered here are almost the same as those back home."

Lucky agreed with her and then started packing her bag for work.

@BOOKHOUSE1

Esha looked at her and asked hopefully, "Does your company have any openings or can you refer me somewhere?"

Lucky tilted her head sideways and threw a questionable look at her.

"If I knew of any openings at my company, I would have told you about them," she said sadly, checking the time on her watch. "Esha, I think you should take any job that you can get right now. If you sit around and wait for the perfect job to be advertised, you might not get one. Grab anything that is offered to you. The package doesn't matter at this stage. You can try and find a better paying job later on."

Esha agreed with what Lucky said. She had noticed that the interviewers asked her a lot of questions about what she had

been doing for the last three months when she did not have a job.

She thought to herself, ‘I shouldn’t focus anymore on getting a higher salary and whether the job is with a company with a good profile.’ Leaving her scorecard aside, she searched for jobs as a normal fresher. She noticed a secretarial job that didn’t require any experience. The interview for the job was on that day itself. She took a quick bath and taking her documents, she rushed out.

The trains were late and so crowded that she couldn’t get on three of them. As the fourth train arrived, a swarm of ladies stood in front of her, eyeing the door as the train came to a stop. The way they charged ahead to get onto the train shocked Esha and before she knew, it became a fight to get inside with everyone pushing and shoving with all their strength.

@BOOKHOUSE1

She failed miserably to push her way onto the train. The next train was expected in 10 minutes. Esha looked at her watch. She was already late by an hour for the interview. She moved to the front, standing close to the edge of the platform.

The women close to her appeared to be experts at getting a place on the train, but she said to herself, “This fight is mine. I have to overcome this.”

A strange rush of blood and energy flowed inside her as the train arrived. The women who stood in front of her swarmed inside, some hurting themselves, some getting their dresses caught. Although Esha could see the difficulties ahead, she kept her focus on getting on the train.

While pushing her way onto the train, she heard a few people swearing at her. Her dupatta flowed out and grabbing it with

one hand, she moved inside and grabbed hold of a hook to steady herself.

She looked around and smiled. No one smiled back, but she continued to smile to herself. It was after all her first victory.

During the train ride, she started to get worried, as she hadn't taken look at the company website. She thought, 'What should I say if they ask me what I know about the company?' She sent up a silent prayer, "God, please don't let them ask me that question. I don't know anything about it."

Then she remembered her fight to get on the train and she shrugged her shoulders, 'Whatever will happen, will happen. I can't change that. Let me first give the interview,' she thought.

Getting off the train, she quickly adjusted her dupatta and let it fall over one shoulder. She tied up her long black hair with a small black clip. It took her half an hour to figure out where the office was situated. She had imagined that the office would be located in a posh building, but it was just a two storey house and it did not resemble anything close to an office.

@BOOKHOUSE1

She looked at it in disbelief for some seconds and then it hit her - it was just as new as she was. She reassured herself, realizing that she needed experience more than she needed the office to look good. And stepped forward and entered the office.

There were two other women sitting and waiting to be interviewed. She took a seat next to them and while waiting for her turn, glanced through her documents.

After the others had been interviewed and left, the interviewer called her inside. Esha smiled at him, said "Thank you," and

went inside.

Handing over her resume, she looked at the interviewer before her. He took a few minutes going over her papers.

“Esha, your educational qualifications are superb. If I am not wrong, you scored A’s in all your subjects. But are you sure you want to work in a small start-up like ours?” said the interviewer with a smile, while still looking at her CV.

His words went unheard. Esha was staring at him. His smile and strong masculine face reminded her of someone but she couldn’t quite remember who it was.

She thought again, ‘Maybe sometimes people do look familiar, when they are not.’ And she started cursing herself for the habit of drawing comparisons between faces.

@BOOKHOUSE1

“Esha,” he said loudly, narrowing his thick eyebrows and watching her closely to see if she had paid attention to his question.

She gave a bright smile quickly and added without thinking, “Yes, sir.”

He frowned again and repeated his question, “Are you sure Miss Esha that you want to work as a secretary for this company?”

His eyes were bright and shining and filled with determination. ‘This was a man who wanted to make a name for himself,’ she thought. His voice had a touch of sternness, yet it was soft enough to be persuasive.

She looked at him. She was in awe of his charming looks and boyish smile.

She thought of saying no but then again, she needed the money badly.

“Yes, sir, I do want to work here,” she replied.

“Well then, it is my pleasure to have you here,” he said and extended his hand. Esha gave a wide smile and shook hands with him. “Thank you so much!” she said.

‘That’s it. No more questions. I have been hired, just like that!’ she thought happily.

The feeling of getting the job so quickly didn’t quite sink in. Just to make sure, she asked, “So, who will be my boss?”

He smiled for a second and then indicated with his hand. “Go straight down the passage, turn to the right and take a seat inside the office there.”

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She stood up, clutching her bag and walked in the direction he mentioned. She mumbled, “I hope the boss is nice.”

She often imagined that bosses to be rude and unpleasant. She just wished that her boss would be a bit considerate as she was a fresher.

The room looked similar to the one she had been in before. The only difference being that there were two computers set up in this room -one on the main desk and the other one on a smaller desk in the corner of the room. She realized that she would probably be working on the one in the corner.

She looked around the room slowly. Apart from the desks, there was a small wooden cupboard and a small bamboo plant next to the window. There wasn’t much at all.

She took out her phone from her bag and panicked when she saw five missed calls from her mother. She picked up the phone to call her mother, but then she heard footsteps approaching. Before she could put her phone back inside her bag, it slipped and fell on the floor.

“Hey, Esha! Relax, don’t be nervous,” said the man who had interviewed her. She felt embarrassed and couldn’t answer him.

“This is my office and you will be working for me.” he said, confirming her thoughts.

“You are my boss?” she asked in disbelief before she could stop herself.

“Why? Is that a problem?” he asked. “I guess you imagined me to be a manager and you would be working with someone else. Right?” He said this in such a casual manner that she couldn’t reply and just nodded her head.

@BOOKHOUSE1

“Well, Esha. I wish that were true, but we don’t have many people working here. So, I act as the manager for interviews, but I am also the boss,” he added and handed her the letter of appointment.

Esha took the letter from him and started reading it slowly. Her eyes fell on the details, especially the salary. It showed her salary to be 8000/- per month. She had not expected it to be so low and a lump formed in her throat as she knew she would have to tell him that she couldn’t take the job. She lifted her head, trying to form the words, when her eyes met his.

“Is it too low?” he asked softly. Esha didn’t know what to say.

“I know it is low,” he said, “but as the company grows your pay will increase too. Well, actually Esha, I am looking for a partner of sorts. If you invest your time and efforts here now with this pay, I will give you 10% of the profit from the company as it grows.”

“10 %?” queried Esha.

He moved forward in his seat and still looking at her, said, “Ok, 20%.” He didn’t smile when he said it though.

Esha started to feel uncomfortable. She quickly said, “I think 10% will be enough.”

“Great. Then Esha, shall we start working?” he said, then paused for a minute before adding, “By the way, my name is Siddharth. Call me Siddharth. No ‘sirs’ please.”

@BOOKHOUSE1

Esha repeated the name out loud. “Yes, tell me what you want to know.”

“So, what would be my job profile?” she asked.

He leaned back in his seat, “That’s a good question.You will be taking care of all appointments, finding new clients…. In short, you will be my right hand. Managing and handling tasks related to the development of the company.”

Esha nodded knowingly. Her job would include doing everything.

He moved his computer screen in her direction, and said, “Basically, we are a wholesaler garment company. We provide an online catalogue for shopkeepers to buy garments from us. At present, we have about one hundred loyal customers, but it has become difficult to manage everything on my own. And also, I plan to expand this business. We are taking up

designing as well. Until now, it has just been pieces of cloth but now on we are going to add life to them."

He smiled at her. "To get started today, can you draw up a list of all the wholesale garment buyers from the internet."

Esha thought about how he spoke. Sometimes he used 'we' and sometimes he used 'I'. She was a bit confused. Did he actually want her as a partner and if yes, then why did he use the term 'I'? Did this mean that she was just an employee and not a true partner.

Working at a start-up company, which did not have a proper office or much furniture or any staff scared her, but what scared her more was the thought - Would he be able to give her a salary every month? While moving to her desk, she was hit with another worrying thought. She was all alone with him. There was no one else in the office. She shivered thinking about what happened when her Uncle turned into a hyena. What if Siddharth behaved like that too? She didn't know where she could run to. He seemed like a genuine person, but her mother's words terrified her.

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With every passing hour, she looked at him and then thought about her salary. She wanted to send money to her mother as soon as possible. She looked at him and making a decision that she couldn't stay in the job, raised her head high, took a deep breath and went straight to his desk.

He looked up halfway through scanning his files and said, "Did you finish taking the list?"

She shook her head and he said, "You can search using Google."

She felt as if he thought she was dumb and said, “I checked on Google, but there aren’t any references.”

“Look, you won’t get the information just like that. Actually, you need to try another way. Check for garment businesses like ours and scan their client lists. Call them one by one and tell them you are working on a survey and ask them how they would like their garment supplier to improve and where they should focus. Write down what they say. Then thank them. Then call them again, this time from a different number and tell them that we provide those services that they said they would like, as well as some additional benefits. Then ask them if they would like to start working with us now,” he said.

Esha repeated his instructions to make sure that she had understood what he wanted her to do.

@BOOKHOUSE1

He smiled. “Smart girl. I guess we could go a long way,” he said.

His eyes were bright and he had a big smile on his face, which seemed to reach his ears and made fine lines appear at the ends of his eyes.

She watched how he kept his files in order and how his eyes remained constant on the screen while typing on the keyboard. He was a bit like Aakash, Lucky’s college boyfriend. She hadn’t seen him since she had shifted to Mumbai and wondered what had happened between him and Lucky.

Esha settled down at her desk and started working on the client list. A few of the clients disconnected her call straight away and a few picked up, but gave excuses about not having time for the survey. There were some who listened to everything that she said and then said they were not interested. She got

only a handful who were happy to share their experience with their present garment supplier.

She didn't expect the calls to be so draining. Taking in a negative response from others wasn't easy. Looking at the next potential customer's name, she felt a little hesitant and looked at Siddharth.

"Do I need to call everyone?" she asked him. He had already been looking at her when she asked him the question.

He shook his head and then asked, "Did you bring lunch with you? If not, we could go somewhere for lunch."

She hadn't expected to be asked to work right away so she hadn't prepared for her first long day at work. And with the work stress, she hadn't thought about her lunch at all. But as soon as he mentioned eating lunch, she could feel her empty stomach needed to be filled.

@BOOKHOUSE1

This would be her first lunch with a stranger. She thought about what Lucky would say - "You went on a date?" She smiled thinking about her friend's stupid questions. She was still thinking about her weird day and how she would share her experience with Lucky and what her reaction would be when Siddharth interrupted her thoughts.

"What are you thinking about? Can you share it?" he asked, smiling at her.

What could she say? Could she tell him about gossiping with her friend about going out for lunch with her boss on her first day of work? No, she definitely couldn't tell him her thoughts.

"It just seems a bit weird to go for lunch with your boss on your first day. I mean I expected some new colleagues and…."

she stammered.

He broke into a smile. “Please don’t make it sound as if I’m an old man,” he said. “I just asked you so that you don’t skip your lunch. I don’t want you to assume I’m a strict boss. As long as you do your tasks well, I don’t have any problem. As for colleagues…. Well, we will hire more people as the company grows.”

She nodded and agreed to go out with him for lunch.

The restaurant they went to was like so many others around the city. Most of the people at the restaurant were with white-collar jobs. She wondered if she would be able to pay the bill. She had only a small amount of change in her purse. She would have to make sure that she brought her lunch with her from home.

@BOOKHOUSE1

She watched him smiling and talking to the waiter, “Thanks, boss. The food looks tempting. I can’t wait to eat.”

The waiter went away smiling. The short conversation between them made her aware that he was a regular visitor to the restaurant. She thought again, ‘what a nice person he was, not boring at all.’

They had just finished their lunch when a young woman wearing a long yellow top and low waist jeans approached him. “Where were you?” she asked. “I’ve been calling you since this morning.” She looked at Esha, and said, “Would you mind if I take him away and speak to him for a minute?”

Esha didn’t know how to react when Siddharth walked away to sit with the young woman at another table. Their conversation was over after a few minutes. Before leaving, she

overheard the young woman say, “I hope you call your Dad soon. Be a bit more responsible. Bye. See you, Esha.” And then she gave Siddhartha a small peck on his cheek.

Esha waved goodbye and soon they returned to the office. She didn’t ask him about the young woman nor did he say anything about her. She guessed she shouldn’t wonder about his personal life. However, it gave her a sense of security that he had someone in his life. So, she needn’t be too scared to work alone with him in the office.

At about three in the afternoon, he received a call from a client. She listened as he dealt with the client in a very professional way and within 5 minutes, he had won the contract.

@BOOKHOUSE1

Smiling at his success, she took another critical look at him. He dressed well and spoke well. He seemed to have a perfect English accent. He didn’t mix Hindi in between when talking to her or to a client. She remembered that when she had gone to job interviews at other start-ups, they seemed to have spent a lot of money on office interiors and furnishings. She couldn’t help but compare that with Siddharth, who was using a normal computer and whose office had furnishings which were just the minimum that was required.

‘Perhaps he didn’t want to waste his resources on these things,’ she thought. She began thinking she should stay in the job as she became more aware of the fact that Siddharth was indeed a smart entrepreneur.

And by the end of the day, she had half-finished calling prospective clients, and had found some who agreed to start working with them. Siddharth was happy with the progress she

had made. He also suggested that they did not need to be so formal with each other. She shouldn't take the boss/employee relationship too seriously. He said they were a team, working together to build up the business. These words made her feel more relaxed and almost as if she was working for her own company.

Before leaving for home, she stuck a note on her desk of things to do the next day. When she looked up, she saw Siddharth smiling at her.

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While travelling back, she was again stuck with crowded trains, but that didn't stop her from getting on them. She felt stronger. "This is my own personal battle," she said to herself.

@BOOKHOUSE1

Having to travel daily on the train made her come face to face with reality. In order to take control of your life, you needed to fight for what you desire.

As she reached home, Lucky opened the door. "Hey, how was your meeting? Did it go well for you today?" Saying this she moved away to light the diya in the temple.

"Yes, I've got a job and he actually asked me to start right away," said Esha, placing her bag on the table and sitting down on the sofa. The cosy sofa made her relax and she curled her legs under her to feel more comfortable. It had been a long day.

"Is it a one-man operation?" asked Lucky looking concerned and coming to sit next to Esha.

“Yes, it is. Is your prayer over so soon? Just the diya and a minute of silence,” Esha laughed, thinking of how impatient Lucky was.

“I don’t think it takes long to thank God. A minute is enough,” replied Lucky.

Esha raised her eyebrows and said, “You don’t recite any prayer or ask for anything? Hmm. I suppose you don’t have to… you have everything you need!”

Lucky turned her head towards Esha and said, “It’s nothing like that, but let’s leave it. Everyone has their own special way to communicate with God. Mine is short and sweet.” Flashing a bright smile, she said, “Ok, let’s put that discussion aside for another time. Tell me, what’s your boss like? Is he hot or is he an old man?”

@BOOKHOUSE1

“He is hot for sure and smart too,” said Esha, smiling at Lucky, whose eyes showed that she was already entertaining certain thoughts from the naughty glow in them.

Patting Lucky’s shoulders, Esha said, “Don’t think so much. He’s already in a relationship and not my type. He’s quite fashionable and smart, unlike me.”

Lucky smirked and said, “You always assume things too soon. Leave something for later and stop saying you are not worth it.”

That night, when she went to bed, even though the soft mattress was very comfortable to sleep on, she couldn’t fall asleep. Her mind was occupied with all the things that had happened during the day. Finally, when she had closed her

eyes, she dreamt about someone holding her hand as they walked along the beach.

She felt at peace with him, talking about everything in her life. They were dancing, singing and laughing together and she felt so happy. Suddenly, a loud ringing sound woke her up. It was the alarm clock letting her know it was already eight o'clock.

She dozed for a few more minutes, then jumped out of bed. She wondered what Siddharth would say if she arrived late on her second day at work. She didn't want that to happen and dropped her plans to prepare breakfast and pack a lunch. Taking a packet of biscuits in her bag, she hurriedly got dressed and left the house.

Rushing from the train, she took a rickshaw close to her workplace, then ran as fast as she could into the office.

@BOOKHOUSE1

"Sorry," she said, "I hope I'm not late?"

Siddharth looked rather busy reading his emails and responded with a nod. There was a difference in the way he was sitting. He looked stiff, as if he was worried about something.

She went towards his desk and asked, "Is everything ok?"

Without thinking, he spat out what was on his mind. "You should have been cautious when calling those potential clients. You should have at least asked me before you made the calls. Now everyone knows Yashodha Garments called them. You know how cheap that looks, taking a survey to get clients."

"But you only said to call them, and how was I supposed to know that the telephone number shows up the company name!" she exclaimed.

Siddharth slouched in his chair, and said, “Never mind. I shouldn’t have expected so much from you on your first day, but I do expect you to come on time. I don’t like latecomers.”

Esha hadn’t expected such a response from him on her second day at the job. She silently moved back to her seat and did not look up even for a second.

She focused on one thing - how to correct her mistake. She was not ready to let someone assume that she was not good at her job when this was only the second day she was working there.

She started checking the services that were provided by them, listing the benefits and comparing the prices with other garment providers. She created an email template, which listed everything in detail. She paused, thinking about whether she should send it or not.

@BOOKHOUSE1

Her finger was still hovering over the enter button on her keyboard when Siddharth asked, “Shall we go for lunch?” His stern voice had changed to a soft one but she was in no mood to go with him. She replied, “I have some work to do. You carry on.”

She was still making the last entries when he came over to her desk and lightly tapped her hand saying, “I am sorry. Let’s go.”

She looked up at him and said, “I brought my own tiffin today.”

He asked again and when she replied the same thing, he went out on his own. She looked back at her screen only to realize that the send button had been accidentally pressed when he

had tapped on her hand. She let out a cry, “Oh no!” She should have asked him, she thought and started cursing herself for being so careless.

Her stomach started to growl with hunger and she took out the biscuit packet from her bag and started eating hungrily as if it was the only meal of the day.

“Oh, nice… I didn’t know you had such a delicious tiffin,” said Siddharth with a soft smile lingering on his lips.

“You want some?” asked Esha and offered him the packet.

“I should have told you before - eating here is not allowed. We don’t have maids so we need to maintain some cleanliness,” said Siddharth and went over to his desk and picked up a file.

Esha was taken aback by his harsh words and thought ‘I haven’t had anything to eat today because of him and he is thinking of cleanliness!’

@BOOKHOUSE1

She thought of telling him that she had not dropped a single crumb on the floor. Instead, she chose to keep the packet inside her bag.

Siddharth turned to her. “Can you please bring your notebook and a pen? We need to go for a meeting now,” he said, and walked out of the office.

Esha looked in his direction and wondered, ‘Couldn’t he see that I have not eaten? All he is thinking about is the meeting.’ But she realized that she couldn’t say anything. After all, he was her boss. She picked up her bag and notebook and followed him out of the office.

They got into his car, which was parked outside. He drove in silence and this made her feel a little better as she was in no

mood to talk either. They stopped near a restaurant and she looked at him in surprise, assuming he had brought her for lunch. She quickly wiped the surprised look off her face when he said, “The client will be here anytime. Can you walk a little faster?”

Esha stamped her foot hard which he didn’t notice. It helped to relieve some of her rising anger. As soon as they sat down in the restaurant, he ordered a number of items from the menu. Just imagining the food made her salivate and her stomach started to growl.

She decided not to look at Siddharth, opened her notebook and started to write some headings without having any idea what the meeting was about. The food arrived and was placed on the table. The wonderful aroma filled her nose. She could clearly imagine what smell belonged to which food but didn’t want to look up from her notebook, as she knew that the fact that she was very hungry would be evident in her eyes.

@BOOKHOUSE1

“Let’s eat.” She heard him say.

She wondered about where the client was, as she didn’t see anyone coming to join them at the table and she looked at Siddharth questioningly.

He gestured to her to eat. She tried to see if he was joking or if he was actually asking her to eat.

“Will you put down your notebook now, please? I am very hungry and I know you are hungry too,” he said while looking down at the table as if he was sorry for what he had done.

Esha folded the notebook immediately, put it back into her bag and asked, “But how did you know I was hungry?”

“You are funny, Esha. Who eats biscuits for lunch? If I hadn’t forgotten my wallet at the office, I would not have known you didn’t really eat anything for lunch,” he said and took a bite of his chappati which he had dipped into the chicken curry.

Esha frowned at him and asked suspiciously, “What about the client who we are meeting?”

He gulped down another bite of chappati, cleared his throat and said, “Because I mentioned meeting a client, you didn’t hesitate to come with me. If I had asked you to come for lunch, you would have taken your own sweet time to decide whether to come with me or not.” He looked at her with a knowing look on his face. She burst out laughing, knowing that he was right.

@BOOKHOUSE1

While going back to the office, Siddharth got a call. He used his speaker-phone while driving. Esha could make out it was his mother. He sounded happy talking to her. It sounded as if his mother was calling from America.

When he finished the call, she asked, “Was that your mother?”

He smiled and nodded, “Yes, my sweetheart.”

Esha smiled at the word he used to address his mother. “Does she spoil you?” she asked.

She didn’t know why she asked that question, but he replied with a smile, “Very much. I belong to a family of Mehta steel company owners, but I wanted to make a name for myself in the garment business. I don’t know why, but the smell of garments makes me crazy. I’d like to create new designs and bring Indian handlooms to the forefront of the world. That is my goal.”

“So you decided to start this company and manage everything on your own, without taking their help?” she asked.

He looked at her and said, “They agreed with me after I said I wanted to start without their help and that if it doesn’t work out in five years, I will go back into the family business.”

She smiled, it was good to know he came from such an established family and yet wanted to run a start-up. She had noticed the way he dressed and had guessed he came from a wealthy background but now he had confirmed that and also why he was running a start-up.

A minute later, her phone buzzed and she saw it was her mother calling. She was about to disconnect the call feeling uncomfortable talking to her mother in front of him, but he told her to answer the call.

@BOOKHOUSE1

As she answered the call, her mother started asking her about her health and her job. She answered her quietly saying, “Mom, everything is fine. I will call you later.”

“Remember, don’t go anywhere else except the office. It seems Aunty Puja’s daughter, who was staying in Mumbai has run away.”

Esha bit her lower lip and said in a hushed tone, “Mom, I only go to the office and then home, and nowhere else. Don’t worry. I am hardly left with any energy to go anywhere else with all the travelling that I have to do.”

Her mother listened quietly and gave her blessings and ended the call.

Esha kept her eyes on her phone. Then she heard Siddharth say, “Your mother is quite strict it seems.”

Esha nodded her head and said, “Yes, she is. Actually, she wasn’t always like this. She was a very broadminded lady, but my relatives influenced her to change her social nature and broad outlook when my father passed away. Since my father died, she hasn’t been the same. She always fears the unknown and doesn’t trust anyone, even me at times.”

Esha’s eyes began to water as she remembered her life when her father was alive. She turned to look out of the window.

“Esha…It happens, but you know what, you can change it,” he said.

She turned towards him and asked, “How?”

He smiled and said, ‘One day you will make her realize that you are priceless and she shouldn’t listen to anyone else. The day when she stops thinking about what others say, she won’t judge you anymore. You will be her pride and joy.”

@BOOKHOUSE1

Esha smiled at his assuring words and she whispered, “I hope so.”

He smiled again, changing gears and said, “You will, don’t worry. Trust in God.”

Esha wondered, ‘Where is the girl who thought God was everything and everywhere?’ Now she couldn’t figure out where God was and why did it feel as if he was always kind to the rich.

But somehow Siddharth’s words moved her heart and she became determined that one day her mother would trust her as she used to before their lives changed.

As soon as she stepped back into the office, she remembered the blunder she had made with the email. She thought to

herself, ‘If I tell, he will get angry and then probably ask me to leave the job.’ But, she had to tell him or he would only get angry with her later.

She went to tell him about it, but before she could tell him about the email, he handed her a file and said, “Take this. It’s the list of all the clients we have. Can you record all of them on our company server?”

She nodded and went away to record the customers’ details.

She was busy filing the details when he said, “I have to go for a meeting. After you finish, you can leave for the day.”

Esha nodded and then remembered that she hadn’t told him about the email. She got up to follow him, but he was already walking quickly towards his car parked outside.

@BOOKHOUSE1

Three days later, remembering the email thing again, she thought to herself, ‘Nobody has emailed back. The email might have gone to their spam list.’ And so she decided not to tell him about it.

A few days later, it was late Saturday afternoon and they were going to a meeting with a client when her phone rang. It was her mother. She disconnected the call thinking she would call her back when she reached home, but she called her again and she had to pick up.

As soon as she picked up, she heard her mother shouting, “Where are you right now?”

“I’m on my way to a meeting,” she said.

“Why did you lie to me about your Uncle?” her mother asked angrily.

Esha started to shake. She didn't know how to answer her mother without being embarrassed in front of Siddharth. "Mom," she said. "I am on the way to visit a client. I will call you later."

Her mother shouted back at her, "I want to meet you right now. Tell me where you are, I will come there."

Esha's felt her eyes fill with tears. She realized her mother had made the wrong assumption about where she was. She didn't want to discuss anything like that with her on the phone. She didn't want to explain while she was in the car with Siddharth that she hadn't done anything wrong.

"Are you coming to your Uncle's place now? Or just tell me where you are, and I will come there," said her mother sternly

@BOOKHOUSE1

Esha tried explaining, "Mom, I am about to go into a meeting." But her mother was not listening.

Finally, she said, "Ok. I am coming to Uncle's place." She ended the call and wiped her eyes.

Siddharth looked at her with concern. "Is something wrong? Can I drop you somewhere?" he asked.

Esha looked at him with tears in her eyes. "My mom is in Mumbai and she thinks I told her lies about not staying with my Uncle. I don't know what to do. I need to go to my uncle's place," she said.

"Don't worry, everything will be alright. Tell me where your Uncle lives and I will drop you there," he said kindly.

Stopping outside her Uncle's place, he asked if he should talk to her mother. "No, but thanks. I will handle this," she said.

When Esha went inside her Uncle's house, her mother stormed towards her and asked, "Why did you leave without telling your Uncle?"

Esha looked at her uncle, who avoided making eye contact with her. Esha's mother shook her and asked again, "Tell me. You know why I sent you here. Why did you leave without informing him?"

Not getting any reply from Esha, her mother slouched on the sofa and said, "So in the end, you did what I was worried about since so long…."

Esha looked at her mother, her eyes welled up with tears. She felt a burst of emotions. "You never trusted me," she said to her mother accusingly. "Did you ask him even once if he did anything wrong?"

@BOOKHOUSE1

"Why should I ask him? I know him well?" argued her mother.

Esha couldn't control her emotions. All the struggles she had faced alone in Mumbai had made her fearless and stronger than she could ever have imagined. She could feel the change within. She looked at her mother directly.

"So, are you saying that you don't know me well? If you don't know me so well, then why should I tell you anything?" Esha asked her.

She took out a piece of paper from her bag and wrote something on it and left it on the table.

"This is the address for Lucky's home where I am staying. And the number of the office where I work," she said looking at her mother. Her mother just looked back at her and didn't say a word. Esha turned away from her and walked out of her

Uncle's house. She kept on walking as the tears flowed down her cheeks.

The next day when she reached the office, her eyes were swollen and she looked pale and sad.

She was quiet and continued to work on her previous day's assignments. Sometimes, she felt her eyes well up with tears and she would wipe them before Siddharth could see them.

She knew he was watching her, but she didn't want to answer any questions, he might ask about what had happened the night before. So when he received a call on the landline, he got up and said to her, "I will be back in half an hour." She was relieved to be on her own for a little while.

But once he had left, she started crying again. She kept crying until she realized he would be back soon. Almost immediately, she heard the sound of Siddharth's car outside the office.

@BOOKHOUSE1

She heard his footsteps approaching and those of someone else walking with him. She quickly wiped her eyes and carried on working at the computer.

Siddharth came into the office. "Esha," he said softly, calling out her name.

She turned towards him and saw her mother standing next to him. Siddharth excused himself, saying, "You both carry on. I will be back a bit later."

Esha looked at her mother. There were tears in her eyes as she held out her arms and she called out her name gently. Esha immediately ran into her mother's arms and sobbed on her shoulder.

Her mother held her tightly, trying to comfort her. “I was mistaken,” she said. “I am so sorry about what happened. I don’t know how you managed everything. Esha, I am really sorry that I left you all alone with that evil man.”

Esha wiped her mother’s tears and said, “It is ok, Mom. It’s over and I am fine.”

They both were still engrossed in wiping each other’s tears and comforting each other when Siddharth came back into the office and handed them a cup of tea each.

After a little while of chatting together about the business, Esha asked Siddharth if she could leave a bit earlier.

“Yes sure,” he said with a smile. “Spend some time with your mother.”

@BOOKHOUSE1

When they reached Lucky’s home, she opened the door and was surprised to see Esha’s mother with her. She looked down at the floor and didn’t know what to say as they came inside.

Esha’s mother smiled, put her arms around Lucky and hugged her. “You don’t need to hang your head down,” she said to Lucky, looking directly at her. “Because of you, my daughter is safe and happy. Thank you Lucky and I am sorry that I always misjudged you.”

Esha noticed her mother’s attitude changed considerably over the next few days while she stayed with her. One night, when Esha got home late due to problems with the trains, her mother didn’t ask her any questions about why she was late. She just laid out the food she had prepared for Esha to eat. She found it strange that her mother didn’t question her about getting home late.

“Mom,” she said. “Why didn’t you ask where was I?”

Her mother patted her on the shoulder and said, “I know you work very hard and must have been delayed for some good reason at work.”

For the first time, Esha noticed that her mother looked at her with a smile in her eyes.

All went well during those days. However, Esha didn’t find a chance to ask her mother how she found out that she was telling the truth. When her mother was about to leave to go back to her hometown, she asked her about it.

Her mother smiled and said, “I had never seen such fire in your eyes earlier, so I knew you spoke the truth. When I asked Uncle what he had done, he started crying. I didn’t ask him anything further and just left his house.”

@BOOKHOUSE1

Chapter 3

It was only a month since Esha had started working for Yashodha Garments but their client list had grown substantially because of Esha and Siddharth's hard work. One day, when she got to the office, he told her he had to go to his house and from there to a meeting with a client.

It was the first time that Esha would be going to his house so she felt a little awkward, but realizing it was work related, she kept quiet.

His bungalow, enclosed in high walls was located in Andheri. As they entered the gate, Esha was spellbound by the architecture of the bungalow and the garden that adorned the house.

@BOOKHOUSE1

Getting out of his car, he walked towards an elderly couple sitting in the garden having tea.

He introduced her to his parents and asked her to take a seat while he did what he had to do.

His mother smiled and handed her a cup of tea, "Tea, Esha," she said.

Esha shook her head and said, "No thanks, Ma'am, I just had a cup before we came." His father looked at his mother and frowned. "Yashodha, you should ask her first whether she would like tea or coffee," he said.

His mother laughed and said, "Oh yes, I forgot. Do you want coffee, Esha?"

Esha smiled at her. “No Ma’am, thank you,” she said. “So, Siddharth’s company is named after you. I didn’t know that.”

His mother smiled when his father said, “He has given the company his mother’s name because if he had used my name, she would have been jealous.”

His parents laughed heartedly at each other. Esha felt overwhelmed seeing the love the family had for each other.

Sipping tea, his mother asked, “Does he take any breaks in the office? He always seems so busy everyday.”

“Yes Ma’am… he is always busy,” she replied. “He often leaves the office very late.”

His father asked, “So, how’s the business doing now?”

Esha told them they had increased their customer list and we’re now designing garments.

@BOOKHOUSE1

His parents seemed happy with the reply. Then his mother said, “He loves his work and doesn’t rest enough. I know he wants to be successful in this field, but please ask him not to get so stressed about work.”

Esha nodded her head and said, “Yes Ma’am, I will try to take care of that.”

A minute later, Siddharth came back. He gently kissed his mother on each cheek as they said goodbye.

Sitting inside the car, Esha said to him, “Your parents are very concerned about you.”

Siddharth smiled and looked at her, “Which parents aren’t concerned about their children? Isn’t your mom concerned about you too?”

Esha nodded her head and remembered her mother's changed attitude. She was still thinking about her when he asked, "Why don't you give her a call?"

She smiled and replied, "I will as soon as I get home."

Siddharth told her they had to go to a national handloom expo, then to meet a client regarding a contract. As soon as they arrived at the handloom expo, they heard someone calling out Siddharth's name.

Siddharth turned and walked towards the man who had a French Beard, and hugged him. Turning to Esha, he introduced her. "Aditya, this is Esha, the life and soul of my company."

Esha smiled at being introduced in such a way. Aditya moved forward and said, "I never thought he would introduce someone like that. By the way, I also own a garment business. Would you like to come and work with me?"

@BOOKHOUSE1

Esha just smiled not knowing what to say, while Siddharth punched his friend's arm gently. Aditya smiled and added, "I would pay you double, as well as make you my partner." He extended his hand and asked, "Can we be partners?"

"Thanks," said Esha, "but I am happy where I am."

Aditya grinned back at her and shook his head. "Never mind," he said. "Someday I will surely hire you."

Siddharth and Aditya spoke quietly to each other, but she couldn't hear what was being said. Then they walked towards the stalls in the expo.

Esha noticed that Siddharth was paying close attention to any new material he found. He would hold one or two of the fabrics together to see how they would work in a design.

They spent almost three hours at the expo going from stall to stall. When Siddharth had finished taking a good look at the different samples exhibited there and enquired about costing and where the handloom was located, he felt happy with all the information he had gathered. He looked at Esha and sighed.

"Esha, there is a lot to be done," he said.

Esha smiled and said, "I am sure you will be able to do it."

When they got into the car, he looked at Esha with an enquiring smile on his face.

She frowned at him, wondering why he was looking at her like that.

"Why didn't you say a yes to him when he asked you to come and work with him?" he asked.

@BOOKHOUSE1

Esha shrugged her shoulders and gave a smile, "I don't think I needed to say yes and I've already said I am happy working with you."

"Thank you," he said with a big smile.

As they stepped out of the car at the client's office they were supposed to meet, he turned to her and said, "I want you to give the presentation to the client."

Esha stopped in her tracks and looked at him. "No, please…I can't," she said.

Siddharth took a step towards her and asked, "Why can't you?"

Esha bit her lower lip and mumbled, "I get scared in front of people. I once had to speak to a big group in college and I

started stuttering and couldn't get the words out. Everybody laughed at me."

Siddharth walked right up to her and looked her straight in the eyes. "You can feel fearful when you are alone, but when you have someone with you to give you strength, you won't feel scared anymore. I want you to overcome your fear. I will be sitting right there, in front of you. Just look into my eyes when you are afraid and everything will be alright. Trust me," he said.

Esha looked at his assuring eyes and slowly nodded her head. "I hope I will do fine," she prayed silently.

Once the formal greetings were over and they were settled in the client's large office, she opened her file and stood up to begin her first presentation. She looked around the room and found everyone looking at her. A lump formed in her throat and she immediately looked at Siddharth who was sitting in front of her.

@BOOKHOUSE1

He gently blinked his eyes, sending her a silent message. "Everything is alright. You can do this."

She smiled and gave the presentation without any stammering or loss of words. Even though it was not perfect, she felt good about it. His eyes had indeed given her the strength to overcome her fears.

Afterwards, she said to Siddharth, "Thank you so much. I've never felt so happy. When I was in school, I was always good at giving speeches, but somehow talking in front of people scared me later, and when I was in college, I could never overcome that fear."

Siddharth smiled and said, “The fear of being the best at presenting probably made you shy and awkward, nothing more. The sooner you build up your confidence, the less chance these fears will bother you. Don’t let fear weaken you.”

Esha took his words to her heart and thought about what he had said. Maybe it was true. If she would have strongly faced her uncle’s behaviour, then her mother wouldn’t have accused her of not being a good girl. Yes, she thought, ‘I shouldn’t let fear get the better of me.’

Siddharth had indeed said the right thing and looking at him during the presentation had helped her get past her fear. She’d never imagined that her boss would be the person who would help her face some of her difficulties in life.

@BOOKHOUSE1

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Soon Esha began accompanying Siddharth everywhere, to all meetings, and often to his house as well. His parents would often ask her about how the business was progressing and they would ask her to take care of Siddharth.

One day, there was a celebration at his house and he had invited Esha to attend. Esha was sceptical about going, but being her boss, he was expecting her to be there.

When she reached his house, she was welcomed by Siddharth and he introduced her to all the other family members. A while later, Siddharth excused himself saying, he had something to see to and asked her to make herself comfortable.

She had been sitting in one of the formal rooms and was just deciding to leave, when a waiter came to her and said,

“Ma’am…Sir is asking you come to his room.”

Esha followed him and he took her to a room and told her to go on in. “Ma’am, Sir is waiting inside.”

She opened the door and went inside expecting to see Siddharth. Instead of Siddharth, she saw that the only person in the room was the man who she had met at the expo, Aditya.

“Hi, Esha,” he said. “How are you?”

Esha felt her stomach turnover. He looked different. He had a leering smile on his face as he walked towards her. “I thought you might like to join me here,” he said to her as he stopped right in front of her.

Esha did not smile back, instead took a big step backwards.

He moved forward and placed his hand on her back and closed in on her.

@BOOKHOUSE1

“Hey, why are you so nervous?” he said.

Esha pulled away from him and raised her hand and slapped him hard across his face. He grabbed her and held her tight in his arms.

She was pushing and shoving against him and trying to escape when Siddharth came in.

Seeing Siddharth, Aditya immediately released her. “She called me here and has been all over me,” he said anxiously.

Siddharth moved towards Esha and looked at her for a second and then stepped closer to Aditya. Aditya showed him his left cheek. “See, the bitch slapped me too,” he said nervously.

Siddharth growled and roughly pushed his friend towards the door. “She is not a bitch, but she did the right thing. Get out of

here before I beat you up."

Esha felt so relieved at the trust Siddharth had in her. He was asking her if she was ok when his mother entered the room. "Are you ok, Esha?" she asked. "We didn't know he was such a monster. Come here Esha."

His mother gave her a big warm hug. Esha then said she would like to go home. Siddharth's mother asked him to take Esha home, safely.

Dropping her close to her house, he said, "I am sorry. I shouldn't have left you alone."

Esha didn't respond but looked at him shyly. "I didn't know you could hit anyone," he said proudly. "I think Mumbai has made you a stronger person and I am happy that you stood up for yourself."

@BOOKHOUSE1

He wished her a good night and got back into his car. She remained standing outside the house and watched him as he drove away. 'He is the reason I feel so much stronger,' she thought. When she had faced a similar situation, her mom hadn't trusted her. Yet Siddharth, who wasn't even a relative had stood up for her and had thrown Aditya out of his house for disrespecting her. She felt happy that Siddharth believed in her goodness.

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Later that night when Lucky got home, she told her what had happened.

Lucky put her arm around her and said, "You did a good thing. I am happy that your boss stood by you because sometimes

even your own loved one's don't stand behind you.".

Esha looked at her confused and wondered if she was talking about her mother. But then Lucky surprised her by saying, "You remember Aakash? We broke up for just the same reason. His best friend had been trying to hit on me from a long time. I complained to Aakash but he never took it seriously and then one day he blamed me. He said that it was my fault because of the way I dress and that his friend was not to be blamed. I couldn't stand to hear him say that it was my fault, so I left him. When I look back now, I feel happy about leaving him rather than getting stuck with a person with that kind of a mentality. These kinds of men think that if a girl wears shorts, she can be tagged as easy by them but it isn't like that. We have to take a stand and show them that they are wrong to think this way."

@BOOKHOUSE1

When she went to bed a bit later, she was lying in her bed thinking about her mom, her uncle, Aditya and Aakash, when her phone rang. It was Siddharth.

"Are you ok?" he asked.

"Yes, I'm ok, just about to go to sleep."

"That's good. I just wanted to make sure. Take care. Good night," he said and disconnected the call.

The incident had disturbed her but the call from Siddharth and his trust in her made her feel good so she slept well.

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A few days later, a small sofa and some office furniture arrived. Things were getting better. Siddharth was busy

everyday sketching designs, while Esha kept busy expanding the client list.

They had won a contract with a client who wanted designer garments and the deal was worth 10 Lakhs. Esha and Siddharth worked long hours every day to fulfil the terms of the contract. Some evenings, Siddharth would still remain in the office and continue working when Esha left for the day.

One day as Esha was getting ready to leave the office, she said to him, “I think you need to get some rest. Since last week you’ve been staying late every night in the office. You should go home early today. Your parents are becoming very worried about you.”

Siddharth nodded his head. “I will, but…” he said and she could see that he was thinking about something else.

@BOOKHOUSE1

“Esha, how well do you know the fashion trends? Can you take a look at these designs that I am doing and tell me if you think anything needs to be changed?” he said and he handed her a book of his designs. She went through each one of them. The colours, the patterns and tiny details that were illustrated in the drawings made her want to wear all of them.

“They are all good, but I am not sure how they will actually look on people.”

“Would you try them on for me when they are ready?” he asked.

“Who…me?” she exclaimed. “No ways. You need to have a professional model to do that.”

“Ah, come on. You are just like a model. If you spent a little more time on yourself, you would look stunning in anything,”

he said to her kindly.

She wondered what he meant. Did he think she was good looking, but she didn't take care of herself? And who was he to judge her like that? She put the file down on the table and looked at him. "No, thanks…ask someone else," she said and then packed up her things and left the office.

On the way home, she started thinking about what he had said about her. She felt a bit embarrassed by his remark. Then she began to think about how they could show off the designs so that they weren't just drawings. Hiring a model and making her wear all of them would be costly.

The next day, while she was sitting at her desk tapping her fingers on the keyboard, she was still thinking about what to do. She began browsing the Internet and found a website, which provided photoshop services at very low prices. She smiled as an idea started to develop in her mind. She started scanning the designs and uploaded them on to their website. Once all the designs were uploaded, she was given a price for photo editing all of them. She then sent them an email with her contact details and gave them very clear instructions on how she wanted them to photoshop the designs and when she wanted the job done.

@BOOKHOUSE1

That night, when she had finished dinner and was resting on her bed, she received a call from Siddharth.

As soon as she picked it up, he said, "Esha, can you come and meet me at the office right away? It's urgent."

Before Esha could ask why, he disconnected the call. She thought it was kind of strange for him to call her at that hour. She wondered why he couldn't wait to talk to her the next day

when she came into the office. Maybe he had something urgent that needed to be done.

She decided to message him. “Is it very urgent?” she asked. Within a minute, he messaged back. “Yes, it is. Come to the office immediately.”

It took her almost an hour to reach the office, taking a rickshaw. She was scared of going to the office so late on her own, so she asked Lucky to accompany her.

When they got there, Lucky said she would wait outside and urged Esha to hurry inside.

She started to feel nervous and could feel her hands shaking. She approached the office slowly and went inside. Siddharth was inside. He was sitting very erect in his chair and was stabbing away on his computer keyboard. She sensed that he was in a very bad mood.

@BOOKHOUSE1

“Hi,” she said nervously. “What’s the matter?”

At first, he stared at her without saying a word. She clenched her hands into fists not knowing what was coming. She asked again in a trembling voice, “What’s wrong?”

He let out a heavy sigh and turned his computer screen towards her direction, and said, “This!”

Esha looked at the screen and froze when she saw what it was. The photoshop website which Esha had sent the designs to had posted all the designs all over the Internet with their name on all the designs.

Before she could explain herself, he yelled at her. “Why did you do this? Did you need money? I know your salary is low, but I didn’t expect this from you!”

She was taken aback by his angry tone and accusations. “Siddharth, I didn’t do this. I would never do such a thing to you,” she cried.

“Then what the hell is this?” he shouted at him angrily.

Her eyes filled with tears. She looked at him desperately. “I don’t know how this has happened. If you want I will give you my resignation right now, but I’m not a thief. You know I would never do anything like this.”

Siddharth snapped, “Oh, no I don’t. You think it’s easy for you to get away with this? Just hand in your resignation and then it’s done and you’re free?” He let out a breath and slouched on his chair. “I trusted you,” he said. “How did this happen? How could you not know anything about it?” He had such a distressed and pained look on his face, she couldn’t stand to see him like this.

@BOOKHOUSE1

“I really don’t know how this happened, Siddharth,” she said pleadingly. “I just sent these to that photoshop website so that we could get to see how the designs would look on real people. I didn’t know something like this would happen. I am not a cheat.” She couldn’t stop herself from crying. “I’m so sorry that this happened. Truly, I didn’t know they would do such a thing. I have always been honest with you, but if you think I have broken your trust, I shouldn’t continue working here anymore.”

She stood up and picked up her bag and started to move out. She felt something pull on her bag. She thought it might be Siddharth, but her bag had got caught on the leg of the chair.

She untangled it and was walking out of the door when he called out her name.

She turned towards him. “I have already messed up so much. I don’t think I can stay here another moment. I need to go. I’m not in any state at the moment to type out my resignation, but I will send it tomorrow,” she said and ran out into the street sobbing.

When she got close to the rickshaw, Lucky jumped out and took her into her arms and tried to comfort her. It took her a few minutes to calm down and to get any words out.

She told Lucky about the foolish mistake she had made and how Siddharth had yelled at her and accused her of cheating him. When she had finished telling Lucky the whole story, she asked the rickshaw driver to take them home. She turned to Lucky and said, “Nothing I say is going to make things right. I will be giving him my resignation tomorrow.”

@BOOKHOUSE1

The next day she sent him her letter of resignation. She was still feeling very upset about the whole incident. ‘Life is tough,’ she thought, but she was not ready to give up yet.

A day or two later, she remembered all the emails she had sent to their potential clients, but she pushed the thought aside thinking she had already sent her letter of resignation so it didn’t matter anymore. Nevertheless, she did feel sorry for him. She had wanted to help him, but instead had only created a lot of problems for him.

Chapter 4

It had been five months since she had arrived in Mumbai and she was still having difficulties finding the right kind of employment with a good salary. Mumbai had not been kind to her.

The pile of rejections from job applications was growing and she had very little money left. She was trying very hard to stay positive and not to let all her worries get her down. While pacing up and down her small bedroom, deep in thought, she slowly began to realize that all the difficulties she had experienced in Mumbai were in fact making her feel stronger and more determined.

@BOOKHOUSE1

She stopped walking, straightened her back, held her head up and looked at herself in the mirror on the wall. "I will make my dreams come true. No amount of pain and stress can stop me from finding happiness and success," she said in a firm voice to her reflection.

The next day she applied for a job with a greater confidence than she had felt before. Luck was in her favour and at the end of the interview, she was offered the job of a sales executive

When she got back home, Lucky was waiting for her. She handed Esha a mug of coffee and asked, "So, how was your day? Did you find a job?"

"I did, but I don't know if I should take it or not?" replied Esha, taking a sip of her coffee.

"But why not?" Lucky asked, looking at her in surprise.

“It is also in the garment business,” said Esha. Lucky frowned at her. “So why is that a problem?” she asked.

Esha slouched back on the sofa “What if Sidd, I mean Siddharth feels that I have betrayed him?” she asked sadly.

Lucky smiled and gave a little laugh. Moving closer to her on the sofa, Lucky said, “Really, Esha, how can you even think that? You told him the truth. You made a mistake. That’s it. You are not a cheat. It won’t matter to him which job you take. He is gone from your life now. You have found work with another company. What does he have to do with you working for a company in the same line of business?” She paused and looked smilingly at Esha. “Unless or perhaps, you are in love with him and that’s what’s making you feel you are being disloyal.”

@BOOKHOUSE1

Esha picked up a small cushion and tossed it at Lucky. “Oh, shut up Lucky. I’m not in love with him and anyway, I can’t fall in love with anyone. You know my mother, she will tell me to come straight back home if she finds out I’m in love with someone,” she said tremulously as though she was in pain. Lucky saw how upset she was. “But your mother trusts you now,” Lucky said, trying to reassure Esha.

Esha took a sip before saying, “Yes, but I can still feel she tries to judge me with the good girl tag. Also, I think she feels that good girls shouldn’t fall in love until they are married. She’s always saying good girls don’t do this, or good girls don’t do that.”

“So because of the good girl tag, you won’t allow yourself to fall in love?” Lucky asked. Esha shrugged her shoulders. “It’s not only just the good girl tag. I can’t fall in love with just

anyone. To be frank, at this point in my life, I don't want to," she said unhappily.

"When love happens, it will not ask your permission and besides, love isn't a bad thing. It's wonderful if you fall for someone who respects and cares for you," said Lucky. She stood up and taking the cup from Esha's hand said, "You know what I think? We shouldn't sit around here feeling despondent about everything. It's Friday night. Why don't we go out? Let's go to a movie."

Esha was feeling quite depressed and didn't know how to say she wasn't feeling up to going out. She didn't want to waste any money either by going to a movie. "I don't think I can …." she started to say looking quite miserable.

@BOOKHOUSE1

"Don't worry about anything," Lucky interrupted her. "The movie tickets are on me. My treat! Come on. Let's get ready to go."

Various people she knew, her schoolmates and her mother had always instructed her to stay away from Lucky, saying she wasn't a good girl and that she was always hanging around with boys and coming home late. Her mother had also made several other bad remarks about her. But all Esha could think about at that moment was that this 'bad girl' was helping her more than anyone else had ever done before. She had always been there for her in every way during her stressful time in Mumbai. It seemed that people were quick to judge someone, without knowing about the real person inside. And this had been done to Lucky. She might have appeared as 'a bad girl' to the outside world, but she had a heart of gold.

“Well, aren’t you going to get ready?” asked Lucky impatiently interrupting Esha’s thoughts. “We need to get going if we want to get there on time.”

Esha quickly got up and went to get ready. She knew that going to watch a movie was a good idea to take her mind off her dilemma about accepting the job offer at the garment company.

While sitting in the rickshaw on the way to the movie, Esha gently took Lucky’s hands in hers. Lucky looked at her curiously. Esha looked into her eyes and with a warm smile said, “Thank you for being such a good friend to me.”

Two friends, who had been brought up with an entirely different attitude towards life had bonded together in an unfamiliar environment.

@BOOKHOUSE1

They were just about to join the queue to buy the tickets to the Hindi movie, Tamasha, when someone called Esha’s name from behind.

Esha turned around and saw someone waving his hands at her from behind a crowd of people. She tried to make out who had called her name. She looked harder at the tall figure and fear began to creep into her stomach. The crowd was so dense that she couldn’t be sure who was waving at her. Her heart started racing. The crowd was thinning out. “Oh no!” she cried to herself. “It can’t be him.”

Walking towards her, she could see Siddharth smiling at her. Her stomach turned over, but she couldn’t look away from him. “Has he found out that I am going to work for one of his rivals?” she wondered anxiously.

She gave him a half smile, not knowing why he had even called out to her. “In any case,” she chided herself, ‘why should I be worried, I never did anything wrong.’ As he came closer to her and Lucky, he gave them a big smile. “Hi Esha,” he said, and turning to Lucky extending his hand. “Hi, I’m Siddharth,” he said.

When Lucky introduced herself to him, he laughed, and said, “Lucky! Such a positive name. You girls are here for the movie? Can I get the tickets for you?”

“No, thanks. That’s not necessary,” replied Esha. Lucky gave him a big smile and said, “Sure. It will be fun.”

He returned Lucky’s smile and went off to buy the tickets.

Esha raised her brows at Lucky questioningly. “What’s wrong with that?” Lucky asked.

@BOOKHOUSE1

Esha felt so angry and embarrassed, she couldn’t get any words out. Lucky leaned towards her and whispered in her ear, “He’s really hot!”

Esha ignored her, and kept her thoughts to herself. What would she talk to him about? And how should she react?

Things had ended on a very bad note between them and that couldn’t be changed by acting as though nothing had happened. She still felt quite shaken up whenever she thought about the incident and now he had shown up again in her life.

When Siddharth came back with their tickets, they made their way into the movie theatre. Esha sat down next to Lucky and Siddharth sat next to Lucky. Esha gave a sigh of relief and sat back to concentrate on the movie. But this became difficult

after a while as Lucky and Siddharth kept on talking quietly together.

The movie ended before Esha could even work out what the movie was about. She had been so distracted by both of them whispering together.

As they departed the movie theatre, Esha could see that Lucky and Siddharth had become very friendly. They said their goodbyes and as they turned to find a rickshaw to go home, Lucky said, “He’s such a nice fellow.”

Esha shrugged her shoulders, “How can you say he’s a nice fellow? He accused me of betraying his trust! Did you forget that?”

Lucky put her arm around Esha, and said, “But he is sorry about that. Can’t you see he’s trying to make up for his mistake?”

@BOOKHOUSE1

Esha remained quiet and didn’t reply. She was still not ready to let go of his harsh words.

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Bumping into Siddharth at the movie theatre brought some changes to Esha’s day-to-day life. But these seemed to be more with Lucky and Siddharth and less with him and Esha. Siddharth would drop by their place and they would go to the movies or out to eat at restaurants and sometimes to a party. At first, Esha used to protest, but Lucky wouldn’t listen to her arguments and would say to her stubbornly, “You know, if you don’t go, I won’t go either.”

At times, Siddharth would try to talk with Esha in a friendly manner, but these conversations were very one-sided. She was unable to let go of his accusations and he didn't bring up the matter. She presumed he thought she was being deliberately unfriendly. She never shared the news that she had got a job of a sales executive in a garment business. She tried to ignore the topic of her job as much as possible.

A couple of weeks later, Esha was at work preparing a presentation for a client about the company, giving details of their market share and how many new clients they had acquired that year.

Esha and her colleagues were waiting in the conference room when the manager walked in and said, "We are just waiting for the owner of Yashodha Garments to arrive before we begin."

@BOOKHOUSE1

Esha felt her hands being to shake. She wondered if the manager had actually said the name of the client was Yashodha garments. Had she heard him correctly? Now she realized she should have told him that she was working with this company. Thinking about what the consequences could be, she bit down hard on her bottom lip. 'Oh no, he will assume I really am a cheat!' she thought anxiously.

When he arrived, he looked great in a formal shirt and black pants. Watching him from the corner of her eye, she thought he looked very charming and professional. She prayed the manager would ask her to do something so she could escape the conference room. But he didn't. Siddharth had moved into the room and stood right opposite her.

When the manager introduced him to everyone, Siddharth casually greeted everyone and then turned to her and asked,

“Hi Esha! How are you?”

The manager immediately looked at them and asked, “Do you know her?”

Esha felt a shiver run down her spine and her heart began to beat rapidly. She looked down at the floor so she wouldn’t see what was coming next.

“Yes,” said Siddharth, “she worked for me for a short while. She was very good at her job, I must say. She had to leave unfortunately. I am glad she found work here - the leading agency in garments,” he said smiling.

She stared at him opened-mouthed and sat down quickly as she felt everyone was staring in her direction. The manager looked at her and said, “Good. Then, before we start, Esha could you bring a glass of water for Siddharth.”

@BOOKHOUSE1

Esha felt uncomfortable about being asked to bring water as if she was an office assistant, but she followed her manager’s orders and brought a glass of water from a nearby kitchen. When she returned, everyone looked angry and upset, except Siddharth. He appeared as calm and composed as she had seen him when leaving the room. Esha couldn’t make out what had gone wrong in her absence.

When she sat down in her chair, her manager shifted a bit in his chair and clasping his hands said, “Ok. Now, Mr. Siddharth, can we discuss the service charges? Esha is back with us.”

She felt the tension in the room. ‘What was going on? Had Siddharth said they must wait until she got back? And why was her manager looking at her so angrily?’ she thought.

The manager's words seemed rather sarcastic. Esha felt her face becoming red. "Sure we can," said Siddharth evenly.

Her manager asked Esha to show the slides and she began the presentation and pointing out all the detail in each graph. She could see Siddharth smiling through her presentation and nodding in acceptance, the way he had done when she had given her first presentation when she worked in his office. And, at times, when her eyes caught the attention of her manager, she still found him looking annoyed and he averted his eyes from her and as if wondering when the presentation would finish.

An hour later, when the meeting was over, Siddharth left and waved goodbye to Esha as he walked out of the conference door. Her manager stormed off to his office.

@BOOKHOUSE1

As she sat down at her desk and tried to figure out what could possibly have gone wrong when she went to fetch the glass of water. She was looking through her emails when she was called to her manager's office.

What followed was a request for her immediate resignation. Her manager said there was no way she could continue to work for their company when she was so friendly with her ex-boss who was from a rival company. She tried to explain that she was very good at her job, and had always been totally honest with him, but he paid no heed to her words and asked her to submit her resignation right away.

Chapter 5

It was a week since she had left her job and Esha spent every day looking for jobs in the newspaper and on the job listing websites. She was feeling very unhappy about losing her job.

Early Saturday evening, Lucky's phone rang. She answered and Esha heard her say, "Hi, Siddharth."

Esha got up and walked out of the room. She didn't want to hear them talking. She knew it wasn't his fault, but losing her job just because she knew him, made her feel angry with him too.

@BOOKHOUSE1

Lucky came looking for her and asked, "Do you want to come with us for a movie?"

Esha looked at her and shook her head. "I don't want to go anywhere with him," she said crossly.

Lucky tried to persuade her, but she didn't want to hear any of her reasons for going with them to the movies. Finally, Lucky went out without her.

She looked through the window and watched as Lucky went out the front door and crossed the road to where Siddharth waited in his car. Going with them was the last thing on her mind. There was something about Siddharth that kept her on edge. She never knew what to expect from him. Just when she had believed he was a good guy, he had showed her an angry, unforgiving side of himself. And the night they had bumped into him at the movies, he had only been respectful and friendly towards her. He was always saying things, which

really touched her heart. She was confused with what he really was.

She couldn't figure out whether he was good or bad. How can you decide if a guy is good or bad? There were several norms that defined a girl as good or bad, but there weren't many for guys. Why was that? She knew that how people behaved in certain situations often showed their good or bad characteristics. She hadn't forgotten his accusations, yet he had spoken very highly about her in front of everyone at the presentation.

She tossed all these thoughts around in her head, trying to find a clue as to whether he was a good person or a bad person. But she thought, 'why did it matter if he was good or bad, he was not related to her.' The whole thing was weird. Even though she had not gone out with him and Lucky, she had spent almost the entire evening thinking about him and how they had met, how he spoke to her, and how he often made funny faces.

@BOOKHOUSE1

Her thoughts came to a sudden halt when her eyes fell on the idols in the temple. She looked at them and then went right up close to them.

Looking at the idols, she spoke to them, "I don't know how to pray. I have seen people spending hours praying together. Lucky only does it for a minute or two and says she is done. I don't know how to do it, but today, I wanted to ask you to show me the correct path. Show me what's right and wrong. My mind seems distracted and I cannot figure out if Siddharth is good or bad. I don't know why it matters, but my heart wants to find out. God, please help me."

She hadn't thought about what to say, but the words just came out. She stepped back from the idols and felt calm and content. She settled herself on the couch and closed her eyes and thanked God for her happy heart.

Just then the doorbell rang. Thinking that Lucky had returned home early, she hurriedly opened the door and said, "Hi… you're home so early."

Her words faded to almost a whisper when she saw Siddharth standing in front of her. He looked at her with such a serious face. "Hi," he said quietly. Esha was so surprised she didn't know what to say. What was he doing here?

She suddenly realized she was wearing her pyjamas shorts with a sleeveless top. She immediately closed the door on him and said, "I will be back in a minute." She dashed to her room and pulled on some clothes.

@BOOKHOUSE1

Two minutes later, she opened the door. "I'm sorry if I disturbed you," he said.

Esha asked, "Do you need something? And where's Lucky?"

He smiled and said, "She is waiting in the car. We were wondering if you wanted to come with us to the movie."

Esha gave him a half smile and gave an excuse. "Sorry, but I have a lot of work tomorrow, so I won't be able to come."

He looked at her, straight into her eyes. "You haven't forgotten about what happened between us at the office, have you? I know I was wrong, but can't you just forget it and forgive me so we can at least be friends," he said. His dark eyes looked at her pleadingly.

“Do you think it was such a small thing that I can just forget about it. You accused me of being a thief, of being disloyal and betraying you. Do you have any idea of how that made me feel? And you are asking me to forget about it! Because of you, I lost my job. Do you even realize how difficult it is for someone to survive without a salary in this city?” she said to him, her voice getting louder and louder.

“Look, I don’t want to talk about it anymore. I’m here to work and don’t want any distractions like you in my life,” she said, biting down on her lip when she realized how harsh those words sounded. Quickly, trying to patch things up, she said in a quiet, serious voice, “I really need to focus on getting a job soon.”

@BOOKHOUSE1

He was looking at her so intensely she thought he could see into her heart and soul. “So, is it too much to ask if you could put the whole incident behind you and forgive me?” he asked with such sadness in his eyes. “We could be good friends. And your position is still open in my company if you want to come back, or else I can give you references of another company.”

Esha could feel her heart beating rapidly. Her heart was saying forget about the past and be friends with him. He won’t harm you.

However, she pushed those feelings aside and said, “I will look for a job on my own but thanks anyway.”

“But come with Lucky and me to the movie tonight. You don’t have to stay here on your own. I won’t talk about anything that will upset you. But let’s just try and be friends, please,” he pleaded.

He smiled, showing his teeth and she noticed a small dimple forming on his cheek that just melted her heart. She looked at him for a moment. He seemed so sincere and like he genuinely wanted to be friends.

"Ok," she said. "But this is the last time I'm trusting you. Just give me a minute to get ready."

Walking out to the car, he turned to her and said, "Thank you for coming. I won't disappoint you."

She smiled, knowing he meant it.

∞∞∞

The next day while going for an interview, she had a smile on her face thinking about the previous night. She thought about what he had said. Did he actually say he was sorry? Did she matter to him? Spending time with Lucky and Siddharth the rest of the previous night had been wonderful.

@BOOKHOUSE1

Her smile faded when she saw Aakash, Lucky's ex-boyfriend getting inside the lift with a girl who was glued to his side. She recognised the girl as they stood in the lift. She remembered that her name was Ramya. They were whispering to each other and the girl started giggling and looking at her. They were obviously talking about her and what she was wearing from the way they were both looking her up and down.

She ignored them and went straight to the lobby of the company where she had come for an interview. But they followed her into the offices and she saw that they worked there. This upset her and she knew it would be tough to work with Aakash around knowing he had broken Lucky's heart.

But she was determined to get a job, even with this unpleasant distraction.

Her happiness knew no bounds when she was offered the job immediately after the interview. She was happy with the working hours and the salary. The company was very modern and progressive. They were involved in many environmental protection programs and were proactive with projects, which benefitted the society. They were delighted to hear that she was a blood donor and said she would be allowed extra time off if she needed to donate blood at the hospital. They would be adding her name to the list of other employees in the company who were also blood donors.

As soon as she had the letter of appointment in her hand, she rushed home to call her mom.

@BOOKHOUSE1

No sooner had she walked in the door when the phone rang. It was Siddharth. “Thank you for coming out with us yesterday,” he said.

Esha smiled and said, “Well, actually, I should say thank you to you for coming back and persuading me to go with you and Lucky. I enjoyed the evening. And by the way, Siddharth, I just got a job.”

Siddharth sounded happy for her. “Well, that calls for a party, don’t you think?”

“Yes, we must celebrate, but only when I get my first salary,” she said laughing.

“Ok, I’ll wait,” he said. “Have you told Lucky yet?”

“No, not yet. I’m going to call her right away,” she answered.

“No, wait,” he said. “I’ll come and pick you up and then we can go and see her together and share the good news.”

She agreed. The tension between them had evaporated and they were becoming good friends again.

@BOOKHOUSE1

Chapter 6

Lucky's cousin was getting married in Delhi and Siddharth was taking her to the airport. Esha had come with to see her off and was sitting unhappily in the back of the car.

When they reached the departure terminal at the airport, Siddharth took Lucky's suitcase out of the trunk while she checked her ticket and ID cards for the security check. Then she turned to say goodbye to Siddharth and Esha.

"What am I going to do without you?" cried Esha holding Lucky in her arms as if she would never let her go.

"Ah c'mon, it's only for three weeks. I will be back soon. I'm going to miss you too. Sidd, just look at how this girl is crying. It's as if I'm going away for a very long time," said Lucky, wiping the tears from Esha's face.

@BOOKHOUSE1

"Please take care of her, Sidd. She's not very good at taking care of herself," Lucky added.

"I will, Lucky. Don't worry. You have a good journey. I will miss you too," said Siddharth and gave Lucky a hug.

Esha stood back wondering. 'Do they love each other? Is she in love with him? Lucky had never spoken so directly to him before.'

The thought of them being together excited her so much that she started smiling and her face was radiant. She had seen them talking and whispering from day one but had never assumed they could be in love. But then she remembered about meeting Siddharth's girlfriend at the restaurant. Had he

told Lucky about her or had they broken up? The thought ran through her mind that perhaps he was playing a double game, but he wasn't like that. Her mother's words came back to her - "A friend can be more dangerous than any vultures and hyenas."

"I don't want to miss my flight. I'd better hurry. See you soon. Bye," said Lucky as she hurried off to the departure gate in the airport.

Siddharth turned towards Esha. "Shall we go?"

"Yes," replied Esha wiping her tears from her eyes.

"There's one more right there," he said, pointing to her other eye, and she smiled at his gesture.

"So, where shall we have dinner?" asked Siddharth reversing his car out of the parking bay.

@BOOKHOUSE1

"Dinner?" Esha asked. "Actually, I was thinking of having something to eat when I got home. It's been a hectic day and I need some time to settle down before work tomorrow."

"Wonderful. So do I get to have dinner made by you? Lucky always says you are such a good cook," asked Siddharth looking at her with wishful eyes. Esha didn't know what to say. She couldn't invite him home now that Lucky wasn't there. After all, it would feel so weird.

She thought for a moment, then replied, "I don't think there are enough groceries at home for me to make a good meal for both of us, so I think we should eat out if you are hungry." She hoped he wouldn't insist on eating at her house.

"No problem. Let's do that," he said easily. Switching on the AC of the car, he said, "By the way my Mom was asking

about you."

Esha looked at him and smiled, "How is she?"

Siddharth smiled back and said, "She's good, but still after me about getting married."

Esha felt uneasy with the sudden mention of marriage. She turned to look at him and was about to ask him what had happened to his girlfriend, when her phone rang.

"Hi, Esha. This is Ramya. I'm at Mittal hospital. I need your help. Please!"

"Ramya, what's happened?" asked Esha and she wondered how she could help Aakash's girlfriend.

"We need A- blood very urgently. I asked them at the hospital to call our work to find out if there were any donors with the A- blood type and your name and number came up. Can you help? Aakash needs blood urgently. He has lost a lot of blood," said Ramya.

@BOOKHOUSE1

"Ok, sure. I'll be there shortly. But what happened?" asked Esha

As she listened to what Ramya was saying, she placed her hand over her mouth and then let out a moan, "Oh no!"

Siddharth, who had been listening to her side of the conversation, asked, "Is something wrong?"

Esha turned to him and said desperately, "I need to go to Mittal hospital right away. It's urgent. Can you please drop me there?"

Half an hour later, Esha was on a hospital bed giving blood while Siddharth sat beside her and talked to her. The bottle

was almost half-full when Ramya came into the room and started crying. Esha asked her to calm down. Ramya wiped her tears and said, “Thank you so much, Esha. I didn’t think you would come after how we treated you.”

Esha smiled back and saw Siddharth looking puzzled. Ramya came closer, held Esha’s hand in hers and said, “I am indebted to you always. I laughed at you the other day, but thank you so much for putting that aside and coming to help him.”

After Ramya left, Siddharth asked her what Ramya was referring to. Esha told him that Aakash was Lucky’s ex-boyfriend. She had come face to face with Ramya and Aakash in the foyer near the lift of the building where she had gone for an interview. She had no idea that they both worked for the same company. She told him how they had laughed at her and had mocked her about her looks.

@BOOKHOUSE1

Siddharth frowned, “Looks?”

Esha smiled and said, “You know, the way I dress.”

He looked confused by what she said. She pressed her lips together, thinking of a way to explain. “I don’t dress the way a city girl does normally… and …” she said looking away.

Siddharth looked angry. “Are you crazy? Don’t even think like that. Don’t judge yourself by what others say. You are very beautiful and the way you dress… your elegance can’t be copied by any other girl.”

She opened her mouth and felt herself blushing. “But that isn’t what people want these days. They don’t want simplicity.”

Siddharth took her hands gently and said, “What other people think and do shouldn’t matter to you. If you dress up

according to them, you will no longer be Esha… and I like the way you are. And you should be proud of yourself. Where is the Esha who slapped Aditya? I wish you had stood up to Aakash and Ramya in the lift. Don't let people misjudge or disrespect your simplicity."

Esha looked at him and her eyes beamed with admiration and respect. No one had ever made her feel so special the way Siddharth did by saying those words.

Siddharth frowned at her and asked, "And yet, you still came here to give him blood. Amazing!"

"I know he was wrong and I won't be able to forgive him, but I still can't risk letting his life slip away because of his foolishness."

@BOOKHOUSE1

Siddharth squeezed her hand gently, "You did the right thing. There are very few like you."

Siddharth waited with her until she had finished donating blood and then drove her home as she was feeling quite exhausted and wanted to go straight to bed.

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Esha woke up the next morning feeling tired and her head was throbbing. She had just sat up on the side of the bed when Siddharth walked into her room and handed her a cup of coffee. "Good morning Esha! How are you feeling this morning?" She was so surprised to see him there, and looked at him with astonishment on her face, she took the cup of coffee he was holding out to her. What was he doing here and when had he arrived? She tried to remember what had

happened the night before, but it was all a blur. She had been so tired when she got home.

She panicked and asked him, “What are you doing here, Siddharth?”

She didn’t understand why he was there. Had something happened with her and him that she couldn’t remember.

Siddharth looked at her and said in a serious tone, “I know what you’re thinking. But I’m not like that. Let me explain.”

Esha felt tears fill up her eyes, “Then why are you here? How am I going to face my mother?” she said crying.

Siddharth looked shocked. He took a step towards her, “Are you insane? Do you think I could do such a thing to you? Why do you always think so negatively about me?” he asked scornfully.

@BOOKHOUSE1

Esha moved away from him and shouted, “No, don’t come near me. First tell me what happened yesterday. I don’t remember anything or what made you come here.”

Esha was really sobbing now. He stepped back and sank down into a chair. “Esha…I honestly didn’t do anything wrong with you, sweetheart. You fainted when we got out of the car, after coming back from the hospital. You can even ask Lucky, I called her to ask where the house keys were and told her you had fainted.”

Esha stopped crying and looked at him. Siddharth eyes were also red. “Esha…I have come to know you very well since the first day I saw you in the pub when you spat out the alcohol that you tasted. I know how you do not like anyone looking at you when you are not properly dressed, the way you did when

I came back to ask you to come to the movies with Lucky and me and how you panic thinking of being alone with me when Lucky isn't around. Remember last night when I wanted to come here and have dinner with you?"

Esha felt so overwhelmed by the fact that he had paid such close attention to how she had behaved in those circumstances. 'I was correct then. He was the guy I saw in the pub. That's why I felt like I have seen him somewhere before!' she thought.

He came over and sat next to her. "You tell me Esha, after knowing all of these things, would I take advantage of you? Am I that kind of a person? Since you've known me, have I ever touched you inappropriately?"

@BOOKHOUSE1

"No," she answered him quietly. She couldn't look at him. She felt so ashamed to have thought badly of him. Tears rolled down her face. She couldn't help it. "Hey, please Esha, don't cry." he pleaded. "I remember the pain in your eyes when you left my office that day I accused you of being disloyal. It never goes away and I can't sleep at night thinking about how I have hurt you. I cannot bear it anymore. Please don't cry."

Esha wiped her tears and with a sad face said, "But I did make a mistake that day and you had every right to shout at me. I destroyed all your dreams for your designs and then I foolishly sent that email which made you look stupid in front of all those potential clients."

Siddharth looked surprised. "Did you send an email?" he asked softly.

Esha looked up and meekly said, "I did. I thought of showing it to you before sending it, but then you accidentally knocked

my hand on the keyboard and it got sent. No one replied so I thought it went to spam mail and decided not to tell you about it. I'm so sorry."

Siddharth started to laugh. "Ok, ok. So that's why a client said they were very impressed with the services and benefits mentioned in an email. I had no idea what email they were talking about."

Esha wanted to smile watching him laugh out loud. Their eyes met and it was the most beautiful moment. She wanted to freeze it. She wanted to stay in the moment. But just then her phone rang. It was Lucky. She jerked herself back to reality. 'What am I thinking? Lucky and Siddharth love each other. How can I come between them?' she thought unhappily.

@BOOKHOUSE1

She picked up her phone and moved away from Siddharth's side. She tried to extend the call as much as possible, chatting away to Lucky and asking her all sorts of questions until, finally she saw him picking up his wallet and getting up to leave. She waved at him. She wanted him to leave, so she kept herself busy talking to Lucky and ignored him.

He watched her for another minute, then waved back and walked out of the front door. Once he had left, she felt much better and could breathe more easily. Thank goodness, Lucky had called. If he had stayed any longer, she would not have been able to hide her true feelings from him.

Chapter 7

Three weeks had passed and Lucky was back home. Siddharth had called her every weekend while Lucky was away, but she always found some excuse to avoid going out with him.

“Hey,” said Lucky as she came into her room. “Siddharth just called. He wants us to join him for his birthday party tomorrow,” said Lucky.

“His birthday?” exclaimed Esha surprised.

She felt in her heart that she had to do something nice for him. After all, he was always so nice to her. She spent the whole day thinking about what to give him. Finally, she decided to make him a special birthday card.

@BOOKHOUSE1

The card was a simple one, with a small design and glitter on each corner. On the front of the card she sketched a baby smiling and inside she wrote, ‘Happy Birthday, Siddharth. May you always enjoy the best of both worlds and keep smiling like a child forever.’

When they reached the party, it was packed with people and lots of loud music. The crowd cheered loudly when Siddharth cut the birthday cake. Standing beside him was the woman that Esha remembered meeting in the restaurant when she was having lunch with Siddharth and who she thought might be his girlfriend.

If he was still with her, then why was he so friendly with Lucky? She wondered what was going on in his mind. She didn’t understand and felt he was cheating on Lucky. The

crowd, the music, and the confusion made her head throb. She wanted to leave the party and looked around for Lucky so she could persuade her to leave with her as soon as possible.

She found Lucky and together they wished him. She handed him the birthday card she had made. Then she excused herself saying she had a lot of work on her mind and needed to get home early.

Siddharth looked at her annoyed. “Ah, c’mon,” he said.

However, she kept repeating, “I need to go.”

Siddharth turned to the girl standing next to him, the one Esha had met in the restaurant and said, “Rakhi, this is Lucky, my very close friend, make her comfortable. I will drop Esha home and come back.”

@BOOKHOUSE1

Lucky looked blankly at Siddharth while Rakhi escorted her inside. Esha felt uncomfortable and didn’t want to leave Lucky alone. She also didn’t want Siddharth to drop her home.

He drove fast, keeping his eyes on the road. His breathing was rough and heavy and Esha could sense that he was angry.

He parked the car just beside Esha’s house. She grabbed the door handle to open it and get out.

“Esha, do you want to ask me something? Or say something to me?” asked Siddharth looking straight ahead at the road in front of him.

“No,” she replied. “Thank you for the ride home.” She got out of the car and let herself into the house. Once inside, she watched Siddharth from the window. He just sat there staring ahead. After a few minutes, he slowly turned his head and

looked at her standing at the window. Then he restarted the car and slowly drove away.

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For the next few days, Esha kept very much to herself, only going to work and coming straight back home. She didn't hang out with Lucky nor did she go with her when she went out with Siddharth.

When Lucky stopped going out with Siddharth and he stopped dropping in at the house, she didn't ask Lucky anything about the change. She couldn't think of a way to start the conversation about his girlfriend with Lucky. She wondered if Lucky would feel heartbroken as she seemed to like him a lot.

@BOOKHOUSE1

One quiet evening at home, a message beeped on her phone. It was from Siddharth. "Can you do me a favour?" it said.

Esha reluctantly typed, "What favour?"

Siddharth messaged back, "Tomorrow is the launch of my designer garments. We are having a fashion show where we will be showcasing our designs. I want you to wear one of them."

Esha messaged back, "I can't. I'd feel awkward. Find someone else."

"Please. I won't ask you to do anything ever again…. just once. This is all I am asking of you. I had always planned, even after you left my company that whenever my designs were going to be showcased to the world, that you would represent the company," said the message.

Before Esha could respond, he sent another one, “Please, Esha. Just one last time. Only this one favour.”

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The next day, Esha and Lucky went to the address Siddharth had messaged about where the fashion show was to be held. The open stage in the center was adorned with bright lights and everything looked very elegant. In front of the stage were rows of chairs for people to sit on.

After fitting into an outfit and with her hair and make-up done backstage, Esha got the opportunity to look out at the huge gathering in front of the stage. She felt scared. How was she going to walk out there in front of all those people?

@BOOKHOUSE1

“Are you sure I can walk out there? I’ve never done this before!” wailed Esha.

Lucky checked her over, making sure the slit was in the right place and that Esha’s hair was falling gracefully down her back. She quickly applied a touch of light red lipstick to Esha’s lips. “There you go,” she said. “You look beautiful just like a bride.”

Esha blushed and hugged Lucky.

A moment later, she pressed her lips together in desperation and said, “But what if I mess up?”

“I know you won’t,” said Lucky.

“Even if you do, I am right there behind you,” added Siddharth with a smile.

Her eyes met his and he gave her an assuring smile.

She took a quick glance at herself in the mirror. The double-layered light purple gown was indeed making her look very elegant and the thin gold necklace was the perfect piece of jewellery to compliment the outfit. The colour was also wonderfully complimenting her skin.

She moved to stand in sequence with the other models and looked out at the stage. She closed her eyes and quickly said a silent prayer asking God to make everything go smoothly.

She turned towards Lucky again, blinking her eyes and feeling panicky. “Lucky, I think my makeup is melting, I’m perspiring already.”

Lucky shook her head, assuring her that her makeup was perfect. Esha held onto Lucky’s hand. “I think you would have done this so much better than me. It’s really not …”

@BOOKHOUSE1

She was cut off from continuing by the voice over the microphone making an announcement and the applause from the audience as the models began walking down the ramp.

Esha looked at the girls walking one by one and even though she was the last one to walk on to the ramp, she felt her turn came very quickly. She looked at Lucky one last time and with her number being called, she climbed the steps up to the ramp. As she took her place at the top of the ramp, she felt a warm hand take one of hers. It held her hand tightly in its grip. It was Siddharth. This wasn’t part of the sequence they had rehearsed. Why was he holding her hand?

She felt the colour drain from her face and her knees began to shake. He was holding her too close, his body was brushing against hers, sending warm vibrations throughout her body. She could feel the hair at the back of her neck standing up.

She could not escape from his hold and kept walking until they reached the centre stage. He finally let her go and she stood absolutely still, not knowing what was coming next. Should she turn around and walk back up the ramp or should she just wait to see Siddharth take the next step?

What he did next, shocked her to the core. He bent down on one knee, took her hands in his and kissed them gently. He slowly looked up to her. “I love you,” he said. Esha wasn’t sure she heard him correctly. Did he say he loved her? The words were screaming in her head.

She felt as if she was dreaming. This couldn’t be happening in front of so many people. It wasn’t possible. Her head was swarming with so many thoughts – What would her mom say? What would she tell her? What must all the people there be thinking?

@BOOKHOUSE1

His words and gesture would have made any girl happy, but Esha couldn’t believe what had happened and wished that the ground would swallow her up.

The crowd began to cheer and clap. She realized that they must have heard what he’d said. ‘Oh no!’ she thought, ‘Now the whole world will know what he said.’ She panicked, tore her hands from his grip and ran towards the exit. She didn’t even hear Lucky calling her as she ran past her as fast as her trembling legs could carry her.

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She opened the front door of the house with shaking hands and stood inside against the wall to stop her body from collapsing.

Just then, Siddharth and Lucky burst through the front door.

Esha ran straight to her room and started throwing her things into a bag. Lucky came after her, grabbed her by the shoulders and turned her to face her. “What’s wrong with you? Why are you behaving like this?” she yelled at her.

Esha looked at her with bewilderment. “Didn’t you see what happened? You love him, why don’t you tell him that,” she said angrily.

Siddharth was standing in the doorway. “Lucky, is that true?” he asked looking confused.

Lucky turned her head towards Siddharth and said, “Yes, I love you, but as a good friend.” She turned back to Esha. “He is like a brother to me, nothing more.”

@BOOKHOUSE1

Esha stood there with her mouth open and stared in disbelief at Lucky.

Lucky put her arm around her. “Esha, what’s wrong with you? How could you imagine us to be in love? There is nothing like that between us. I always knew he loved you. Why do you think he was always coming here? It wasn’t for me, but to see you. I could see how much he loved you, but you refused to see it.”

Esha raised her voice in protest, “But… he has a girlfriend!”

Lucky looked at her in disbelief. “He has a girlfriend, you say?” She looked at Esha with raised eyebrows. “Maybe he had one before…but not now.”

“He has a girlfriend. It’s Rakhi,” replied Esha adamantly.

Lucky and Siddharth both started laughing. She quickly realized that maybe she was wrong to have thought that.

"Rakhi is my cousin," said Siddharth. "She's my mother's favourite niece and very much a part of our family."

She sat down on the couch feeling very embarrassed. Holding her bunch of clothes against her chest, she said, "But…."

Siddharth cut her off. He was disappointed and unhappy. "But what?" he asked. "You always have so many things running around in your head. Tell me what you are thinking."

Lucky said, "Yes, tell us what are you thinking now?"

Esha looked at the two of them shouting at her. She shouted back, "How can I when nobody will let me speak?"

@BOOKHOUSE1

Siddharth stared at her and said, "Lucky, can you leave us alone for a few minutes. I have to sort this out. I want to hear what she has been thinking and take care of all her 'buts'."

Lucky left, closing the door behind her, while Esha looked like a child going to a school for the first time and watching her parents leaving her there.

There was silence. He sat down on the bed next to where she was standing. He pulled her by the hand and made her sit down beside him and gently asked, "Now tell me what you have been thinking."

Esha didn't know how to tell him. The grip of his hand was still tight, making sure she didn't run away. She felt her body reacting warmly to his touch. She looked at him watching her intensely. She looked down at their hands.

Siddharth loosened his grip and asked her, “Did I do something wrong?”

“How could you do that in front of all those people? What will they think of me? You asked me to wear one of your designs and walk down the ramp. But you created a scene in front of so many people,” she said, once again feeling the enormity of his action.

Siddharth looked frustrated. “Damn it! I expressed my love for you in front of hundreds of people. If someone should have been really scared or nervous, it should have been me. I didn’t think you would react like that and run away. All I wanted to do was to show the world that I love you.”

He continued. “Please, if you are scared about this affecting your good girl image, then be rest assured that it has not been harmed. If anything has been hurt, it is my image because you ran away. But that doesn’t matter to me. I just wanted to tell you how much I love you. Nothing else.”

@BOOKHOUSE1

Esha could believe what he was saying. She bent her head down and said, “But love ……,”

Siddharth took her face in his palms, “But love? What about it? You don’t love me, is that it?”

She was so dumbstruck, she couldn’t speak. He brought his face close to hers, and placed his nose against hers. She felt his breath on her mouth. His closeness was evaporating all thoughts from her mind. It felt so good.

“Tell me you don’t love me and I will get out of your life. You will never see me ever again,” said Siddharth, looking with

such anguish into her eyes while making his way deep into her soul.

She stumbled over the words. “I can’t trust anyone or love anyone,” she said with so much sadness, it almost broke his heart.

“I don’t need you to trust me or love me back,” he said earnestly. “But give yourself a chance and trust your heart and listen to what it says. Doesn’t it beat every time you see me? Doesn’t your body feel something when I am close to you?”

He pressed his cheek against hers and whispered, “Doesn’t your face take on a glow when your eyes meet mine?”

She felt the adrenaline rushing through her body. She wanted to hear more. She knew every word he said was true.

@BOOKHOUSE1

Keeping his cheek pressed against hers, he whispered again, “Tell me, does your heart say you can’t trust me?”

Esha closed her eyes, the power in his words struck right to her soul.

He was silent for a minute and then moved away from her. She wanted to feel him close to her again. She looked at him, her eyes shining with all the love she had for him. He came closer. She didn’t take her eyes away from his. She wanted her soul to absorb the way he made her feel.

“Esha….” he said, and she could feel his suffering. He so desperately wanted her love.

She looked at him as he stroked her cheeks lightly with his fingers.

She was lost in the love in his eyes. All she wanted was to be near him, to hear him say he loved her.

“Esha, if you still feel you don’t love me. I can leave and…”

She shook her head slowly and placed a finger on his lips. The heat of his lips almost burned her finger, but she kept it there. “Don’t say that,” she begged. “I can’t bear the thought of never seeing you again,” she sobbed out.

Tears escaped his eyes and ran down his cheeks. She wiped his tears and placed her palms on his face.

“I can’t lie anymore,” she said with tears in her eyes. “Since the day I first saw you, I felt something inside me change. I could no longer control my emotions and feelings. You have made me so happy but also sad and angry at times, frustrated and even jealous. But when I am with you, I feel stronger and I can overcome anything. I have never felt so many emotions rush through me, but I was always scared of my mother. She wanted me to be a good girl. I thought by showing my love for you it would break her trust in me, but I can’t do it anymore. If I need to be bad, it’s ok, but I can’t hide it any longer. I have loved you always, from the day I first saw you. Since I have met you, despite all that has happened, you have always been in my heart.”

@BOOKHOUSE1

Siddharth enveloped her tightly in his arms, “My Esha,” he said lovingly. “Expressing your love doesn’t make you a bad girl. Keeping your love inside you and letting it burn up within is bad. There is nothing good or bad outside, it is just what you feel inside. If you feel happy inside, that means you are good. You don’t need to show anyone you are good, just feel it inside.”

She could feel his heart beating strongly against her with every word he said.

They remained holding each other. Being in his arms was like magic. They made her feel better, safe and loved. “Esha?” he asked.

Esha moved her head away from his chest and looked up at him. “Yes?” she asked.

Siddharth took her hands in his and cleared his throat. He looked at her with such emotion in his eyes and with so much joy. “Will you marry me?” he asked, looking at her expectantly.

Esha’s smile got bigger and bigger, her eyes were shining with love. She couldn’t look away from his gaze. She let out a deep sigh.

@BOOKHOUSE1

He said her name again. She hid her face in her palms and quietly said the word he had been waiting to hear, “Yes.”

He pulled her hands away from her face and lifted her chin, so he could see right into her eyes.

“Say it again,” he said with a smile on his face. “Yes, I will marry you!” she said in a strong clear voice.

Siddharth shouted with joy and swung her around in his arms. Lucky came running into the room. She looked at both of them and asked, “What’s happening?”

Siddharth waved her out and said, “Nothing, just give us two more minutes.”

Lucky smiled and left the room, closing the door behind her.

Esha's happiness started to fade when her mother came to her mind. "Mom will never agree," she said disheartened.

Siddharth smiled, taking her hands in his. "Who says?"

Esha looked at him in surprise when he took out his phone. He held out the phone so she could see who he was calling. He was making a video call to her mother.

Esha shook her head, "No, please don't call her."

But the call had already connected and her mother appeared on the screen. Siddharth held the phone in front of her. "Hi, Esha!" said her mother with a big smile on her face.

Esha smiled back at her and then didn't know what to say. She was feeling so overwhelmed, happy and nervous at the same time. Siddharth could see that she was almost in shock. He turned the phone towards himself and said to Esha's mother, "Aunty, can I marry Esha and make her mine?"

@BOOKHOUSE1

Esha could feel herself blushing. She feared what her mother's response would be to Siddharth's question.

"I couldn't be happier. I hope you both keep smiling like this always. I don't think there could be anyone better than you for my Esha," her mother said sounding extremely happy for them.

Siddharth smiled at her mother and then looked at Esha who couldn't believe what she had heard her mother say.

Siddharth muted the phone speakers and asked Esha, "Do you want to ask my parents too?"

Esha eyes widened and she said, "What? Are you crazy?"

Siddharth unmuted the speaker and asked, “Aunty, where are my mom and dad?”

Her mother turned the phone towards Siddharth’s parents who were sitting on a sofa near her.

He smiled and asked his parents, “Mom, Dad! Do you agree to this marriage?”

His mother smiled and said, “Of course, we do. Why else would we be here together? We all agree to this marriage. And I want Esha to be my daughter-in-law as soon as possible.”

Siddharth blew a kiss to his mother and disconnected the call. He looked at Esha.

She asked, “How did you manage this?”

@BOOKHOUSE1

Siddharth smiled and replied, “I told you, my mom was looking for a girl for me. When I mentioned your name, she screamed with joy and said she would talk to your mother. They spoke on the phone and your mother agreed to the marriage instantly. I arranged for my parents to visit your mother to make all the other arrangements.”

Esha narrowed her eyes and looked at him closely. “And my mom agreed to all of this?”

Siddharth stroked her hair and said, “She loves you, but she also trusts me.”

She looked at him for further explanation. “Actually, your mother and I have been in touch before this. I used to call her and sometimes she used to call me after she went back home from Mumbai. So, I guess she knew all along how I felt about you. Does that explain everything?”

Her eyes sparkled and she still felt ecstatic from the love he had shown her.

Siddharth knelt down in front of her. His chest touching her knees, he held her hands and asked, “Once more, please.”

Esha blushed. “Once more of what?” she asked knowingly.

Siddharth raised his eyebrows and watched her closely. “You better say it again before I start kissing you right now. Now that we have our parent’s approval, I’m allowed to do that.”

Esha wanted to hide her face again in her palms before saying those words to him. She suddenly felt shy but he held onto them as if he was never going to let go. He looked at her impatiently. “Esha, please.”

Looking shyly at him and with a trembling voice she said, “I love ….”

@BOOKHOUSE1

Before she could finish, his lips were on hers. His kiss was as soft as the touch of a butterfly. She could feel her heart beating rapidly in her chest.

A strange sense of wonderment ran through her body. She lifted her hands and held his head lightly. She felt his hands drawing her into his arms.

She moved into his arms wanting to feel him close. It felt as if the whole universe had embraced them and they didn’t need to worry about anything. Neither good nor bad could touch them anymore. Bliss had poured over them as they held each other.

They were still holding and kissing each other when Lucky called out to them. “Can I come in now?” she asked.

He moved away, breaking the spell and he whispered in her ear, “Now that you are mine, we can do this again and again. Those lips are mine.” Esha blushed and giggled at his words.

“Lucky, please come inside,” called out Siddharth releasing Esha and sitting down.

As Esha heard Lucky’s footstep approaching, she moved a little away from him, but he held her hand in his and made her sit down with him, “I’m not letting you go again,” he said in a serious voice.

Lucky came in and stood smiling at them. “I’ve been waiting so long for this day. Wow, I’m so happy for both of you.”

Lucky ran to Esha and kissed her. Esha couldn’t stop smiling at her.

@BOOKHOUSE1

Lucky turned towards Siddharth and said, “Please don’t say that you are going to live together right away.”

“Lucky!” Esha said indignantly.

Siddharth blushed with joy and said, “That would be great. I don’t want to be apart from her now, but we will only stay together once we are married. Or if Esha feels fine about it, then we could….”

Esha looked at him horrified. “No, no. I could never do that,” she said proudly.

Lucky and Siddharth started laughing, while Esha hugged Lucky again.

Epilogue

Esha opened her bags and started unpacking the clothes that she had brought for the honeymoon trip. Each item made her smile and brought back glorious memories of their special time together. She missed him already.

Moving to the door and latching it, she went to take a quick shower. She was alone in the house and Siddharth had already left for work. He had promised to get back home as early as he could that evening.

She took a long, warm shower. Her body glistened from the steamy spray of water. She dried herself and changed to a baby-pink coloured suit and sat down to put on her sindoor.

@BOOKHOUSE1

The red colour of the sindoor looked wonderful against her skin and her face was radiant.

She looked at herself in the mirror and the memories of her wedding day began flashing before her eyes.

Since early that morning, people had begun pouring into the venue and her mother had been running around like a machine. Even so, at times she would come and stand close to Esha and give instructions to the ladies saying, “Do it well. Everything must be perfect. It is my darling’s wedding.” Kissing her cheeks gently she would say, “My Esha…” and then before Esha could hug her back or say anything, her mother would dash off to do something else.

The makeup artist did the final touch up and said, “Done. Look at yourself now.” The makeup artist then turned towards

the other females in the room, and said, “Have a look and tell me how you like it.”

They all gathered around Esha, the young ones giggling while the older ones said, “Simple and beautiful.” One of the ladies made her way to stand next to Esha, stared at her for quite some time and said, “But all will be gone tonight…the makeup, the clothes, everything. After all, it is her first night as a bride and wife.”

Hearing this, they all burst out laughing. Someone called out, “The groom has arrived!” and they all rushed out wanting to see him, leaving Esha alone.

She felt relieved to have a little time to herself. The ladies’ words echoed in her ears, “All will be gone… after all, it is her first night.”

@BOOKHOUSE1

She looked at herself in the mirror and smiled, imagining Siddharth looking at her and trying to remove all her jewellery and…. Her pleasant thoughts stopped and she realized, ‘all will be over in one night.’

She was asked to come and meet her groom. Her cousins accompanied her to the stage. She kept her head down and didn’t look up once. She could feel all eyes were on her. With the help and guidance of one of her cousin, she was seated beside Siddharth.

He took her right hand gently and held onto it. But she didn’t look at him. The Priest started reciting the mantras. Three hours later, the ceremony had ended, they had enjoyed a wonderful wedding feast and the guests had started to leave. She was led to Siddharth’s room. The other young ladies accompanied her saying, “Make him struggle. Don’t do

everything very quickly. After all, by the end of the night… you would be his completely…"

She found the room had been decorated with a variety of flowers and the bed was spread with the petals of red roses. White flowers in the shape of a heart decorated the center. She smiled and looked at the glass of milk left for her. She thought about what the girls had said, "Make him struggle. Don't do everything very quickly."

She heard him coming towards the door, laughing and wishing his cousins goodnight. He closed the door behind him and moved towards her and kissed her passionately.

She didn't respond too much, the words of the girls kept ringing in her ears, he paused and looked at her saying, "Esha, you don't have to be nervous. I will be gentle."

@BOOKHOUSE1

She looked at him shyly. He looked at her for some time as if waiting for her to say something. He thought for a minute and wondered if he should talk to her about them using protection. But, he knew she would feel awkward. He would have to be patient and go slowly with her. Taking her hand, he said gently, "Let's go. I need to show you something."

She started walking behind him. He stopped, turned towards her and said, "Let's remove all this first," pointing to the jewellery and her heavy dress.

He waited while she removed her jewellery and her heavy dress and changed into a salwar kameez.

He took her hand and led her to the terrace outside. All his cousins were sitting in a circle with a lamp in the middle. They were talking and laughing.

They sat down with them and joined the discussion about which uncle acted the weirdest and funniest parts of the ceremony. Esha sat listening and smiling. After a while though, she couldn't help herself and started to yawn.

This caught Siddharth's attention. "Ok guys, I think it's time everyone left and gave us some time alone," he said to those in the circle.

One of his cousin said, "But, where should we go? We had planned to stay on the terrace."

Siddharth smiled and said, "You can all go to my room. We will stay out here."

His cousins laughed and a moment later took their cue and left them.

@BOOKHOUSE1

He took Esha's hands and drew her down on to the thin mattress. "Let's lie down and look at the stars," he said softly.

She immediately did as he said and laid down next to him and looked at the glittering sky.

A short while later he said, "Esha, I need to tell you how sorry I am."

"For what?" she asked.

He turned towards her and said, "For that day… when I accused you of stealing my designs."

She took his hand in hers and gave it a squeeze. "I have already forgotten about it. It happened so long ago."

He smiled then said, "Tomorrow, we have a fashion show in Delhi, where we will walk down the ramp together again. But

this time you will be by my side as my beautiful bride. Afterwards, we will go to Andaman island."

Esha looked at him with some concern, and asked, "You want me to walk with you again?"

He smiled at her. "Yes! Don't worry about it. Let's look at the stars and dream of other things!" he said, putting his arm around her.

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The fashion show went off well, rather it was better than the previous one. He held her hand as they walked down the ramp together, holding her close.

When they reached the position in the center, he knelt down on one knee and kissed her gently saying, "I love you."

@BOOKHOUSE1

This time, she smiled and even though she felt herself, she mouthed the words, "I love you too."

She felt like a queen walking with her king, full of love and pride for the man beside her.

Claps and cheers echoed for a long time after they left the stage.

He had announced to the world again that he loved her with all his heart.

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When they reached their hotel on the Andaman Islands, it was already quite late. They had a light meal and being tired after

the long day, showered and went straight to bed. Siddharth fell asleep the minute his head touched the pillow.

Esha tossed and turned for a while. She wondered why Siddharth hadn't kissed her or touched her. She looked at him lying alongside her, but he was sleeping peacefully.

The next morning, she woke up with him stroking her hair. After asking her if she had slept well, he said, "Let's freshen up, then eat something. I want you to see the dolphins."

"Ok," said Esha, "I just need a few minutes in the bathroom."

When she came out, Siddharth served her tea and they enjoyed a bread omelette and some sweet buns for breakfast.

She got up and wanting to get dressed, opened her bag on the bed to look for a dress to wear.

@BOOKHOUSE1

She started rummaging through all the clothes and eventually tossed everything out on to the bed. He looked at her and asked, "What's the matter?"

"These clothes are all sleeveless tops and shorts," she cried.

He frowned and looked at the heap of clothes. "What did you pack?" he asked casually.

"I packed my normal dresses, some jeans and salwars," she said looking very upset.

He looked grave for a moment. "I think your bag must have got mixed up with someone else's," he said. "Wear one of those outfits in the meantime. We will check with the airlines." She looked at him and said, "But …"

He picked up one from the bag and said, "Here, wear this."

She reluctantly went to change and wondered how could her bag have got mixed up when it had tags with her name on them. Coming out of the bathroom, she looked around and found him lying on the bed.

She moved closer to him and said, “You know, I’m sure my bag had tags with my name on. I don’t understand how I ended up with the wrong bag.”

He looked at her and raised his eyebrows as if surprised by this information. “Oh, is that so?” he said.

“Yes, that’s why I don’t know how it is possible for me to have the wrong bag.” She looked at him as he stood up.

Coming closer to her, he said with a serious face, “I agree. How can this be possible?”

@BOOKHOUSE1

He hugged her close. “Come, let’s go see the dolphins,” he said excitedly. “Don’t you want to see them?”

“Yes, of course I do,” she smiled at him.

He took her hand and walked her out through the open balcony door. The sunlight was bright and flashed on their faces. She beamed with joy as she looked out over the sea in front of them and saw a group of dolphins jumping through the surf. One of them leapt high up into the air.

She exclaimed, “Oh, how beautiful!”

Siddharth hugged her close from behind and placed his head on her shoulder. “Yes, she is.”

She turned her head and looked at him, “I am talking about that dolphin.”

He wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her closer. “Me too,” he said, smiling at her.

She ruffled his hair gently, then looked at him suspiciously. “You placed all those sleeveless top and shorts in my bag, didn’t you? And you took off the name tags?”

He nudged his nose against her collarbone and said, “Yes.”

She blushed and turned to face him.

Her eyes met his and she looked at him with questioning eyes. “Why?” she asked gently.

He didn’t answer her. He swept her up in his arms and gently placed her on the bed and lay down facing her. “Since the day I saw you at Lucky’s house in that sleeveless top and shorts, I wanted to see you like that again. So I packed all of those and removed what you had packed,” he said smiling at her.

@BOOKHOUSE1

She blushed. “You’re crazy!” she gasped.

He wrapped his hands around her waist and brought her close and whispered in her ear, “Yes, for you, and I want to eat you now.”

He started kissing her passionately and slid his hand under her top. She kissed him back, but held his hand to stop it moving further.

He turned and moved over her, the heat and passion from their kisses was intense. He tried to undo the button of her shorts as he trailed kisses down her neck. She immediately grabbed hold of his hand and tried to move it away.

He lifted himself off her and sat up. His body was still touching hers. “Esha?” he asked with concern.

She understood what he was asking. “I am not comfortable like this. There is so much light coming in through the window and I feel a bit strange with you sliding your hands all over my body. This is all new for me,” she said shyly.

She bit on her bottom lip and looked at him to see his reaction. She thought she might have annoyed him as he moved away from her and sat cross-legged at the foot of the bed.

She was still watching him when he held out his hands and took hers in his. “Esha, my love. Marriage is not only about sex. It is about two souls joining together and knowing each other inside and out. If you don’t feel comfortable, I won’t force you.”

She looked at him, surprised and didn’t know what to say. He got up from the bed, slid his hand down her hair gently and said, “Come, let’s go out.”

@BOOKHOUSE1

She was still sitting on the bed thinking about what he had said about marriage, when he turned and said, “I kept a few pairs of your jeans and some t-shirts in my bag if you want to wear them. I’ll wait for you in the lobby. Don’t be long.”

She watched him walk out and gently close the door of their hotel room. She sat there a moment or two longer thinking how different Siddharth was from what she had heard about men for so long and how they jump into marriage just to have sex.

She dressed quickly and went down to the lobby. She smiled when she saw him patiently waiting for her. She walked up to him and held out her hands to take his.

They spent most of the day riding around the island, going for a long walk on the beach and stopping at some interesting little places to sample the many treats they offered. It was quite late that night when they got back to the hotel. They had dinner and went up to their room. As they got to the door, Siddharth opened it for her and said, “You go ahead and go to bed and get some sleep. I’ll be back in about 10 minutes. I have the room key. I’ll let myself in.”

She went inside the room, freshened up and lay down on the bed. She desperately wanted to close her eyes and fall asleep, but she didn’t want to until Siddharth was back.

She was lying awake when he came in after ten minutes. He walked straight into the bathroom and he seemed to take some time in there. When he came out, she pretended she was checking her messages on her phone. She noticed he wore only shorts and was bare-chested.

@BOOKHOUSE1

She tried to keep her eyes on her phone, but when he stepped closer to her, she smiled looking up at him. He gently palmed her face in his hands and kissed her forehead, “Good night, my Esha. I have made arrangements for tomorrow. We will leave early tomorrow morning and go out on a boat to see the dolphins in the middle of the ocean and many other places. Get some sleep.”

He got into bed on the other side of her and pulled the blanket over his body. He turned his back towards her and grabbed a pillow to hold to his chest.

She kept away her phone, turned off the bedside light, and slid under the blanket. Moonlight cast a faint glow of light in the room. She lay there for a long time and realized that Siddharth

had fallen asleep almost immediately after getting into bed. Esha turned to face him and looked at his back. In her heart, she wanted to be the one being held in his arms, not the pillow he was holding so close. She wanted to rip it away from him and throw it away.

She lay there wondering what she should do. She moved closer to him and stroked his back gently, then slipped her fingers through his hair. She stopped when she heard Siddharth mumble, “Please, stop disturbing me.”

‘Is he angry with me?’ she thought tearfully. She didn’t want him to be angry with her. She put her hand on his shoulder to call his name. He didn’t turn around or move. She tried again. He moved his shoulder and growled, “Stop disturbing me. I’m making love to my wife.”

@BOOKHOUSE1

She smiled, realizing that he was dreaming about making love to her. This was what she wanted too. She understood what he was doing and why he tried to stay away from her. She moved even closer to him and hugged him tight. He turned around and asked in a sleepy voice, “What’s the matter?”

She smiled and put her arms around his neck. “Make love to me. I am your wife,” she said, looking at him with all the love in her heart.

She hugged him and buried her face in his chest, then kissed him gently.

He wrapped his arms around her and kissed her forehead, “You are so unpredictable.”

She snuggled in a little more into his body. He stroked her hair and lifted her chin up and said, “Now, let me look at your

beautiful face. I need to kiss it all over."

As their kisses became more passionate, Esha took his hands and moved them under her shirt. The touch of his skin against hers caused her to moan with pleasure. The intensity of their lovemaking went beyond anything they had thought possible. Finally, when he was deep inside her, she felt her soul join with his and as they soared together to reach the climax, she knew that she belonged to him with her body and soul.

The continuous ringing of Siddharth's phone woke them from a deep sleep the next morning. He picked it up and Esha heard him say, "Hi Lucky. How are you? Here talk to Esha" and handed her the phone.

She had just said hello to Lucky and was moving the blankets up to cover her body, when Lucky mockingly shouted, "Oh, my! So you've done it!" Esha looked at the phone and saw it was on video call mode.

@BOOKHOUSE1

Angrily, she screamed, "Lucky! Stop talking like that!" She looked at Siddharth, feeling so embarrassed, but he was lying back on the pillow and smiling at his victory.

Lucky didn't stop there. "So, did he realize you were a virgin?" she asked blatantly.

Esha rolled her eyes at that question being fired at her out of nowhere. Siddharth was laughing and said loudly, "Yes, I knew that on our first night together."

He turned the phone towards him and said to Lucky, "I wanted to discuss using some protection, but kept quiet knowing she would feel awkward." They both started laughing.

Esha shouted, "I know about protection."

He asked, still laughing, “Then why didn’t you ask anything yesterday?”

She didn’t know how to tell him that she didn’t know how to bring up the subject about protection as she really didn’t know much about these things. She had hoped that he would take care of that. She felt awkward and embarrassed not knowing how to express herself. She wanted to crawl under the blankets and hide. They kept on laughing and it annoyed her. She tried to take the phone from him to tell Lucky she would call her back later.

But Lucky could still see her and carried on teasing her. “Oh, look at her. She just glowing and her neck is covered in love bites.”

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Esha couldn’t stand it any longer and grabbed the phone and cut off the call. Siddharth was still laughing at her reaction. She was angry and upset. She slid down under the blankets and hid her face, feeling so ashamed.

Siddharth pulled the blanket back and said with a little smile, “There will be many more love bites on your body tonight. You can’t hide them all.”

She snatched the blankets back and hid her face. He removed it again and carried on teasing her. “I will destroy your good girl image with lots of love bites.”

She turned her head away from him and said, “If that’s what you want. But if you turn me into a bad girl, you won’t be interested in me for very long.”

He turned her head and looked her straight in the eyes. He had stopped laughing and he looked so serious. “I will love you

always and will never stop kissing you and making love to you, even when all your hair has turned white and you have no teeth left."

She smiled and hugged him tight and said, "I love you, Siddharth. I feel truly blessed to have you in my life." She kissed his chest gently and asked, "Will you love me forever?" He stroked her back and said, "I have always loved you. I love you now and will love you forever, my Esha."

She looked at him and pulled a face. "But that sounds awful!" she cried.

"What?" he asked. "The kissing with no teeth?"

She nodded and he moved his hand away from her back and cupped her face and said, "Ok then we will have to do lots of kissing before that happens. Let me kiss you right now."

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She smiled and kissed him back, overcome with happiness as he drew her back into his arms. He loved her and she loved him. Nothing else mattered.

∞∞∞

Love is a blessing from God
It is above the judgment of good and bad
It is the rhythm of the heart
Which finds peace when it finds the perfect one
Made for you by God
You may run away from it
But, love will find you in the end.

NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Reviews are the lifelines of a book. From the reviews received, an author gets to know how the readers perceived the story. And it also helps in plotting a new one.

If you liked the love story of Esha and Siddharth please leave a review about the book.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nivedita Vedurla started her career as a technical support, moved to software testing and then became a Business Operations Manager at Fabcoders, Goa. She gave up her career to follow her passion of writing. Her first book 'Two Angels ' received tremendous love and appreciation from all her readers. Her stories reflect her strong belief in love, faith and the power of the mind. When she is not writing, she plays around with her kid and taps her foot to dance numbers.

She is more like you and less like a book-nerd author. She likes interacting with people and enjoys talking to them. If you wish to talk to her and know more about her, you can tag her on her Facebook Author's page @NVedurla and let her know what you feel about her books, or just drop a comment on her website vedurlanivedita.com

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The other books by the author.

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